

Focusing Unbounded  
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**Overview:** In this essay I celebrate the sheer richness of Focusing's theory, practice, and applications, with all their overlappings and interaffectings. I address the ways that this richness also makes it difficult if not impossible fairly to catalog the work that is being done in the field. I appreciate that as a community we have, so far, largely resisted the temptation to hierarchize or retreat into camps, and I challenge us to continue cultivating our open-bordered culture. I invite us to live forward in the awareness that, as in any community, all participants in the Focusing Community also contribute to it. And instead of a catalog, I begin constructing a flowing list of contributions and contributors. I explicitly welcome the reader to add to the list.

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The project to write this essay began with a discussion with The International Focusing Institute (TIFI) about how handy it would be to have a list of the various schools of thought and practices in Focusing these days. I knew it would be a challenge to produce such a list, but I hardly appreciated how much.

One way that I savor a complex phenomenon is to understand it as a structure; I see maps and matrices. When that turns out to be difficult or impossible, my impulse at least makes me attend to the matter closely. Failing in the endeavor might frustrate me superficially but, in the end, it delights me. Failing shows me that there is more beyond what I can categorize. It reminds me to comprehend wholistically, and to resist the temptation to be parochial or judgmental. So it is with the Focusing community.

In the Focusing world, we would need a Gregor Mendel to taxonomize the work that is being done. Alternatively, a mindmap of the Focusing community would be a beautiful, kaleidoscopic design – if only it were possible to create such a thing. It is not – or rather, it would not be possible to come up with one definitive version.

There are several reasons for this.

First, every Focuser focuses in a uniquely individual way. What comes to each individual from one moment to the next is unique as well. Furthermore, Gendlin ultimately came to see Focusing as something fundamentally interactional. That opens up the whole topic exponentially: the experience of two persons in a Focusing interaction includes each one person's experience, each one's perception of the other's, and the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. <sup>1</sup>

It follows that what gets articulated *about* Focusing can expand endlessly, and even that can never encompass everything that might happen *in* Focusing. Thus, whether our mindmap were meant to

capture experience or methodology, it could not be bounded. It would have to be like a map of the universe, with no edges, spreading outward beyond what we can know.

Making our mindmap would require at least some language, and language is a slippery thing. It is all the more so when it is used to describe something as idiosyncratic as experience. You and I may need to check and double-check that we mean the same thing when we talk about “a chair.” It is even harder to be sure if we are talking about “blue,” and harder yet to share an understanding of “pain”; never mind “my pain”; never mind, say, “a tingling sensation kind of like electrified water, like the feeling of being three-quarters alive.”

Just as any Focuser who chooses to communicate about their Focusing experience must find language for the attempt, so must we seek out language to talk about Focusing per se – Focusing as an activity or state or phenomenon. Here again, it’s difficult to be sure that what I mean when I use a word is what you understand when you hear it. Then, too, there is the issue of translation, never mind the way different cultures and different tongues frame and express experience, and – in doing so – even influence it. We look again and again to study the language Eugene Gendlin chose. At the same time, quite naturally, many Focusers develop a particular vocabulary and seek out fellow Focusers who are willing to join in an agreement about what it means.

In the process, variations arise not only in languaging Focusing but also in thought and theory about it. Some terms have taken on a variety of colors if not meanings. “Presence,” for instance, has a different valance or different implications for different individuals and schools of thought.<sup>2</sup>

Focusing teachers are of course especially motivated to find ways to talk about Focusing, and they bring to the endeavor not only their own experience but also their teaching styles and their unique interests. Those give rise to different opinions about what is important and what works well.

Many practitioners have contributed to the intense richness of the Focusing world by developing new means and methods, new priorities, new ancillary tools, and new theory. Several of these developments are so comprehensive and/or so particular that they are promulgated under their own special name.

The good news is that *this is good news*.

Gendlin himself enthusiastically encouraged Focusers to make Focusing their own and think for themselves; to make it fit each of us rather than shoehorn ourselves into a Procrustean methodology. He wrote, “What arises directly in the individual must have priority over any concept. A concept may help one lift out some aspect of experience. Even so, at the next moment further steps can move quite differently than that very concept would have led one to expect.”<sup>3</sup> He also welcomed thinking, theorizing, and methodological developments beyond his own.

His Philosophy of the Implicit overarches all his work on Focusing, and this tapestried state of affairs is itself an instance – a realization – of that philosophy.

It exemplifies the human experience that is  
inter-affecting,  
endlessly life-forward-moving,  
inherently creative,  
inherently humane, and  
never fixed, frozen, or dogmatic.

A question arises here that must be acknowledged, if not answered: Does this mean that “anything goes”? That we’re working with an utterly fuzzy definition? That any sort of somatic or meditative practice can be called Focusing? No.

When we learn Focusing we are reliant on our teachers to do something very Gendlinian in its paradoxical nature: to be *clear about the fuzzinesses* of what is and what is not Focusing.

When I ponder what Focusing is and isn’t, these observations come to my mind (other people are likely to think of different ones):

- The Philosophy of the Implicit and the phenomenon of the *felt sense* are central to the concept of Focusing: not only central, but specific and unique.
- Eugene Gendlin formulated his philosophy to articulate a particular aspect of living, and a particular way of thinking about it.
- He invented the phrase “felt sense” to point to a wholistic sensing of an experience of living.
- He underscored that at the heart of Focusing there are choices to be made: choices about being open, present to, and curious about what is there, what is felt and what is coming to be felt, within one’s-self and inextricably with one’s environment including other persons.
- He offered Focusing as a practice that is somatic while it also honors thinking; in fact, this philosophy sees the mind and body as inseparably one.
- It acknowledges simultaneously and paradoxically that words are malleable and that there is such a thing as the exact right word.
- The “Ah! That’s it!” that comes when something is perfectly expressed, is not merely the marker for a transformation that has taken place but actually a transformative moment in itself.

Gendlin’s articulation of the notions I have bulleted are, to my knowledge, uniquely his. There are two tracks of thought here, which touch and intersect and intertwine with each other. There is the Philosophy of the Implicit, of which we can say that Gendlin is the author, the creator. By contrast, Gendlin did not invent the *phenomenon* of Focusing, which occurs in human behavior. He identified it, named it, brought it to our awareness and made it available to us for both understanding and experience.

That combination of invention and description is part of why I would expect my colleagues to collect a different list of bullet points than the list I collected. In a conversation about what Focusing “is,” I would expect to be disagreed with. And I would see the conversation as, itself, an instance of Focusing’s unboundedness.

Nonetheless I would insist on one thing: in Focusing, we attend to our lived experience, but that does not mean we have been Focusing every time we notice some aspect of what we live.

That said, we can Focus with, or in the context of, every feeling or experience we have. So no wonder Focusers around the world have woven a tapestry of uncountable threads! There is unmatched specificity in what we experience, even as the phenomenon of Focusing itself creates a community for all of us.

The unmatched specificity cannot be mapped, as noted before. Nonetheless, we can’t help but notice the myriad ways that Focusers are teaching, talking about, and using Focusing, around the world. This is something not only to notice but also to appreciate. In the course of interacting and inter-affecting with each other, we also can’t help but try to give names to what we are doing or seeing others do.

If we must do without a mindmap, surely we can at least catalog what practitioners, themselves, are calling their work?

Considering this as a topic in itself is fascinating. In order to explore the topic, it must be useful to attempt a catalog – or, more modestly, a list. And if we are to maintain a functional overview of the Focusing world, a list may even be necessary.

Nonetheless, let’s acknowledge that there cannot be one right way to do it. And that is good news too.

There are at least four debatable – if not unanswerable – questions about the task.

First, what is being listed? What shall we call them? Are they...

- styles
- 2<sup>nd</sup>-generation models
- models of training
- modalities
- developments
- applications
- areas of focus
- areas of concern
- combinations
- schools of thought
- cultures
- subcultures

crossings  
camps  
fields...

of Focusing? No doubt some descriptors apply to some occupants of the list, and others to others? Should that define the parameters of the list?

Second and related: The list begins with Gendlin's method as published in his book *Focusing*, but his own work evolved. Some but not all of his later work was published, while *Focusing* remains the most widely disseminated. Thus what other people have done or are doing might be intended to accomplish any of:

- promulgate Gendlin's work *as published*, in his earliest and best-known writings or later
- capture, articulate and promulgate Gendlin's work *as evolved* later and discussed in public or private lectures or conversations
- make fresh practical *applications* of any of those in new contexts
- expand on and develop forward from Gendlin's *theoretical* work
- devise fresh ways of *discussing and teaching* any of the above

All the same can be said about Thinking at the Edge (TAE) and about all the "crossings," too.

So the question follows: which offerings are comprehensive or particular enough to take a spot on this essay's list? Is something on the list because it contributes new articulation, new insight, new applications, new practices, or new theory? The list could be very short, listing only the handful of people and theories that we could truly call second-generation founders after Gendlin; or it could and likely should be much, much longer.

Third, related to but not quite the same as the previous question: A fortunate feature of our community is that Focusing theoreticians are also practitioners. There are also leading practitioners who are not theoreticians (and do not self-identify as such) but whose experience contributes to our collective knowledge. What distinction should be drawn here?

Fourth, how do we integrate into those questions the reality that Focusing is as individual as the Focuser? Suppose we leave aside the variety of experience each person may have, and narrow our attention only to their approach, how they go about doing it. Does this list then have to be as long as the list of all the Focusers in the world? At least that would be a finite number, at any given moment. Still this approach would obviate whatever usefulness a list might have; the logical absurdity of it points neatly to a central problem of making such a list at all. We are back to looking for identifiable bodies of theoretical or practical work in the field, and struggling to define what that means.

Fifth, should people's names go on the list? It would be wrong not to credit people who have contributed so substantively and richly. Besides, pointers for further investigation are handy. But if this list gives prominence to creators of new or different material, then (a) how new or unique is new or unique enough, (b) what does it take to own credit for it, and (c) where is the commensurate prominence for extraordinary teachers and exponents of established material? The problem exists in every discipline: as

soon as any line is drawn, people end up on one side or another of it and controversy follows. And yet, such controversy can legitimate, necessary, and clarifying.

Most basically: whatever definitions are in use, and whatever lines are drawn on the list I will propose here, I know that much is missing. That simply has to be true, if only because my list is skewed towards the English-speaking world on account of my own ignorance of work being done across the globe.

Furthermore, as soon as I hit “send” to deliver this article for publication – in other words, before it is even published – the list will be out of date.

Thus, the comments and responses that this list may engender will be not merely reactions but also contributors to it. That is as it should be. I hope – no, I rely on the fact – that the flexibility of online publishing will allow ongoing revisions.

After all this musing on definitions and boundaries and overlaps, it may be anticlimactic to read the list itself, at the end of the article. I think that is as it should be, too. The “problems” of making any such list are also the “juicy bits” of the topic. More value may lie in the questions than in any answer.

This came as a surprise to me. Originally, I just wanted to make the darn list, and the problems and questions stood in my way. Eventually, I noticed that if those problems and questions inspire us to think and feel into the *all-of-that*, we are again in that experiential space where what we are doing is an instance of itself. Gendlin thought and felt about thinking and feeling. We can, too. We can, if we choose, Focus about Focusing. What is new, what is fresh, and what have we known all along that is coming newly and freshly?

Having discussed, earlier in this essay, some of the issues that arose in setting out to make a list, I turn now to issues that may strike you when you read the list I actually wrote. I hope that a few additional notes will help make sense of the decisions I made. These issues, too, explain why a single, cogent, comprehensive mindmap is currently out of reach.

**About groupings.** I did make groupings that I thought had *a logic*, but other logics could work too, and in any logic the boundaries of those groupings must be malleable. Someday a historian will write the story of how Focusing grew, and that writer may discover (or create, or impose) a structure that I am unwilling or unable to pinpoint.

Probably the most contention-inviting point about this is that I have not drawn a clear line between theoretical development and practical application. This may read as creating false equivalencies between theory and application, and between founders and practitioners. I intend no such thing.

Let me use myself as an example: I put Focusing-oriented voice work on the list because identifying the range of Focusing activity is part of the list’s purpose, and I put my name next to it because I’m the only person I know who is doing just exactly what I’m doing. (I am delighted in advance that I will learn just

how wrong that is.) But I do not measure myself or my contributions in the same league as the giants on whose shoulders I stand.

This points to a problem of measurement per se. Measurement is valid in some ways and blinding in others. I wrote dozens of category headings and threw most of them out because they seemed at first to measure *substance* but then lent themselves too readily to an implication of *worth*. It is unquestionably true that I am not a founder. Still I dare to say that I and my fellow Focusing-And-\_\_\_ers do more than *use* Focusing – and in using it, *spread* Focusing. I believe our work also *grows* Focusing. The giants among us stand, in turn, on the shoulders of Gene Gendlin himself; and yet he said he was constantly learning from others.

I also wrote dozens of category headings that initially felt correct because they have currency in our community, but then threw them out because they did not stand up to close scrutiny. Consider these examples:

1. We have grown into the habit of using “Focusing-oriented” largely for the things therapists do (because of the phrase FOT) and “Focusing and...” for the rest. But if we were looking at these phraseologies for the first time, we could make a case for saying “-oriented” where we now say “and”, and “and” where we now say “-oriented.” The easiest case to make in the end is for how much their meanings overlap.
2. Some bodies of work have a name that specifically points to the use of Focusing in relationships or community. But all of our Focusing is inherently interactional, and any Focusing we do – even just alone in our rooms – influences all our interactions.
3. The distinction between therapists and non-therapists is a real one, and there are many applications of Focusing that are identified as therapies and others that are not. At the same time, every application of Focusing is therapeutic.
4. Further to that point: Therapists are trained to handle such complex matters as trauma and addiction, yet trauma and addiction do not sit solely as sub-topics under “therapy.” Any one of us who Focuses deeply, no matter what everyday occurrence has invited us inwards, may well find ourselves encountering, addressing and even healing our traumas and addictions. That is the power and potential of Focusing. It may even be the whole point.

So, in the end, where I put a blank space between groups it is meant only to make *collections of examples* that I saw to have important characteristics in common. Not naming those characteristics is a deliberate choice. It invites you to notice not only the differences, but also the blurring and blending, across those spaces.

**About sequence:** First and most important: The order of listings *within* a group is not intended to carry meaning.

There is a case to be made for giving TAE and its varieties their own group, and I did choose to do so. That said, it seems to me that TAE is often referenced as something of an afterthought to Focusing, which I think hampers fruitful communications across something I wish were not seen as a border. So

while it logically follows Focusing in the Founding Work section, I put its follow-on group in a place where the reader must encounter it on his or her way to reading more about Focusing.

Given the way we read, and our acculturated perceptions of space, we regularly confuse sequence with hierarchy. Should we resist that conflation? *Can* we resist?

**About names:** Let me say it simply: some names are here and many are not. Again, the distinction between developers and practitioners is not clarified; again, I acknowledge that distinction and I leave defining it and underscoring its validity to the future historians.

I could have written “and others” on almost every line. One irony is that the most developed fields, such as FOT, would need the most names to be added. When you investigate for yourself, you will find more, whatever keyword you use to begin your search. As the list grows, you will find it easier and easier to find leads in whatever direction your interest takes you. Likely, you already know names and activities to add. They might be your own.

I debated for a long time about including names at all. Communities get into trouble when our attention goes more towards the names and less towards the concepts being developed by the persons who carry those names. That is one of the principal engines driving territoriality and division in places like academia. If this essay triggers competitive ego, it will have backfired badly.

So I cannot say it strongly enough: This list is not a declaration, it is an invitation. You are likely to read it and think “Why is such-and-such a concept missing?” or “Why is so-and-so missing?” Let that not be an affront but a call for action: add your voice.

**The upshot:** In other words, I made some decisions, deliberately decided not to decide certain things, and left other choices to chance. I repeat that in doing so I cannot possibly have done it “right.” The part of me that wants to get things “right” was troubled, until I understood that getting it right isn’t the point at all.

Rather, the point is to grapple with the complexity of this topic – or perhaps it would be better to say, to grapple with the size and complexity of the space this topic lives in.

I was fascinated to find myself continually waylaid by that complexity, but my motivations for trying in the first place remain:

I want this article to celebrate the duality in Focusing that I have pointed to already: its combination of specificity and universality.

I believe that none of the – again, what shall we call them? ways? schools? – of Focusing is *the right one*, or the sole legitimate heir to Gendlin’s legacy. I want us to resist the temptation to hierarchize and to divide.

I want people to know about the variety of theoretical offerings and the variety of applications. I want people to explore them, holding in their minds two questions simultaneously: “How does what I am learning today add to the engagement with Focusing that I had before?” and “How are what I comprehended before and what I am using now, both Focusing?”

I want people’s explorations to lead them into fresh and new territories, to add to the list. And/or, I want people to recognize when what they have already been doing is fresh and new – that it belongs on this list already.

I want people to cross boundaries, rendering those boundaries permeable as they go.

It is natural that various dialects and jargons should spring up in the language of, and about, Focusing. I want people to learn more than one dialect, not only because it is personally enriching, but because it allows us to keep on speaking with one another and keeps the community whole.

And so I offer this list humbly:

- as a seed for a list that should be longer already and will certainly become longer over time, with the hope that every reader who has a contribution to make will reach out and make it; and
- as a catalyst for thinking, feeling and Focusing about the all-of-it, within ourselves and among our community.

### **The Founding Work**

Classic 6 Steps Focusing as articulated by Eugene Gendlin in his first book, *Focusing*

Thinking at the Edge (TAE) as initially developed by Eugene Gendlin, with colleagues especially (and not necessarily in this order) Mary Hendricks, Kye Nelson, Theresa Dawson and Nada Lou

### **Building Forward with TAE**

Applied TAE and the TAE-based "Game of Inquiry" Thetaland™ (Evelyn Fendler-Lee)

Experiential Critical Thinking (ECT) (Donata Schoeller, Sigridur Porgeirsdottir)

TAE and Qualitative Research (Satoko Tokumaru)

### **Building Forward with Focusing.....**

Inner Relationship Focusing and Untangling® (Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara McGavin)

Domain Focusing, Macroshifting (Changing the Unchangeable) (Robert Lee)

Wholebody Focusing (Kevin McEvenue)

Bio-Spiritual Focusing (Edwin McMahan and Peter Campbell)

The Pause (William Hernandez and Soti Grafanaki)

### **Segueing into Focusing *within... or and... or oriented to...***

Applications of many varieties by many practitioners –

*Therapy* = FOT = Focusing-Oriented Therapy

*Trauma*

*Addiction*

*Bodywork*

*Coaching*

*(Also coaching using TAE)*

*Interaction*

*Community*

*Creativity and Arts*

*(also Creativity using TAE)*

*Business*

SUCH AS:

*[examples, self-identified as having to do with interaction]*

Changes Groups (Many developers as well as practitioners; Kathleen McGuire's book)

Community Wellness Focusing (Patricia Omidian and Nina Joy)

Community Empowerment Focusing (Lynn Preston)

Focusing and Empathic Communication (Beatrice Blake)

Relational Wholebody Focusing (Karen Whalen)

Interactive Focusing (Janet Klein and Matsumi Maede)

Relational Psychotherapy (Lynn Preston)

Cross-lingual Partnership (Robert Lee)

Empathic Opportunity Coupling (Robert Lee)

We Space /Shared Field Focusing

Resonant Sensing for Peace (Shared-Field Focusing) (Bruce Nayowith)

*[examples, self-identified as having to do with therapies]*

Somatic Experiencing® (Peter Levine)

Person-Centered Therapy with Focusing (Akira Ikemi)

Indigenous (formerly Aboriginal) FOT (Shirley Turcotte)

Recovery Focusing (Suzanne Noel)

Art Therapy (Laury Rappaport)

Dreamwork (Leslie Ellis)

Background Feeling Work (Marine de Fréminville)

Children Focusing (Marta Stapert, Analia Zaccai, René Veugelers and others)

Positive Psychology (Joan Klagsbrun)

Mindful Focusing (David Rome)

Active Pause (Serge Prengel)

*[examples, self-identified as “models of” or “approaches to” Focusing]*

The Felt Sense/Polyvagal Model (Jan Winhal)

[examples, self-identified as “Focusing-in” or “Focusing-and” or “Focusing-Oriented”]

Police training (Achim Grube)

Highly Sensitive People (Sensory Processing Sensitivity) (Emily Agnew)

Marketing (Gabriela Riveros)

Business Development (Sally Tadmor)

Sexuality (Kati Kimchi)

Nature (Peter Gill)

Landscape Architecture (Ram Eisenberg and Dana Ganihar)

Voice (Marcella Calabi)

and...?

We can ask Gendlin’s magnificently simple, powerful, and open question here: “Is there more?” The answer is yes.

What would you add?

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This invitation is not merely rhetorical. Please feel free to write to me, Marcella Calabi, at [mc.calabi@gmail.com](mailto:mc.calabi@gmail.com)

And what makes me the keeper of the list, for now? Only that I was foolhardy enough to step forward.

Many thanks to Robert Lee, Emily Agnew and others whose feedback helped me improve this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Gendlin wrote and spoke about this, but I am recalling something he said to me personally, when I was pressing him for some definitions he did not want to give. Instead we ended up in an interplay of communication; this involved expression by each of us born of deep listening within ourselves, close empathic listening to each other, and equally deeply generated and felt response. “Now *this* is Focusing,” he said. “This, what we’re doing now.”

<sup>2</sup> I thank Robert Lee for pointing this out to me.

<sup>3</sup> Gendlin, “From The Politics of Giving Therapy Away: Listening and Focusing” p. 5 [http://previous.focusing.org/fot/giving\\_therapy.asp](http://previous.focusing.org/fot/giving_therapy.asp)