

WHEN SUSAN CAME TO MY DOOR for her first session, she looked like a time bomb waiting to explode—her breathing was rapid, her jaw was clenched. Tears began to spill down her face as soon as we got settled in our chairs. She told me that, in the past month, she'd experienced more and more overwhelming fear. ■ "My main symptom for the past couple weeks has been to wake up with a sick dread, terror, and doom. This is something really huge, and I feel I'm making it worse by resisting it." I asked if she was aware of something that had triggered this reaction. She told me that she'd attended a workshop in a well-known method for processing trauma a month earlier. "I tried to manipulate the images of my grandfather molesting me when I was 4, but they just got stronger." ■ "That sounds like it's really painful for you," I said. ■ "It's like there's a heavy stone sitting on my

An by ANN WEISER CORNELL
Invitation
to
Present





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*Focusing Helps Clients
Embrace Their Most Feared
Emotions*

chest. I can hardly breathe. I don't want to have these feelings! I know I need to go into them and get through them, but I feel like I'm going to die if I do."

We've all had clients like this. People don't seek therapy when they're calm, collected, and steady. In fact, they often arrive flooded by the emotions that drove them to call us in the first place.

In my early days as a therapist, when something like this happened, I'd get close to panic myself. *Will I be able to help this person? I'd wonder. Do I have enough tools and techniques? What can I do with my own fear of being as overwhelmed by emotion as my client is by her emotions?*

Now when I see a client who's in the grip of emotional panic, I have a different experience. I've learned that there's something that I can do that will not only help the client calm down, but enable the therapeutic work to begin almost immediately. It's a relatively simple intervention that shifts the client's relationship with even the most intense emotions without controlling them, distracting from them, or repressing them in any way.

When clients come to us in the grip of fear and desperation, it's tempting to use methods that seek to contain or manipulate the overwhelming experience (e.g., "See if you can shrink that anger down to a size you can handle, and then set it farther away from you"). But the problem with this type of intervention is that it reinforces clients' identification with the part of themselves that's feeling overwhelmed.

A number of modalities today approach this type of client with gradual desensitization, perhaps teaching relaxation techniques and then looking for triggering thoughts and feelings that the client can dispute or counter with relaxation. Again, the assumption is that the client needs to contain, handle, or manipulate emotions, and the therapist conveys the not-so-subtle message "I agree that these emotions are dangerous and need to be contained."

In contrast, another kind of approach joins the other side of the war, urging the client to cry, pound a pillow, and express the feared emotions. The difficulty here is that the client's own inner safety boundaries are disregarded, and he may be left with

even less ability to contain his own emotional responses, triggering even more experiences of flooding in inappropriate situations.

So what can a clinician do besides reinforcing the need to manipulate the emotional experience, control it, or break down the boundaries and let it all out? It might seem that we need an intervention that's as "strong" as the emotions, but, in fact, with very subtle shifts in language, we can facilitate enduring changes in clients' relationship with their emotions. From these subtle and seemingly small changes in perception, clients discover that they don't have to *be* their emotions, but can be *with* them in an attitude of empathic curiosity. And that opens the door for profound and lasting change.

Beyond Containment and Flooding

"It's like there's a heavy stone sitting on my chest." The mute appeal in Susan's eyes was heartrending. I knew I could become her "savior" if I rescued her from her feelings. Many years ago, I might have been tempted to do just that. But over the years I've learned that real progress for Susan would come only when she learned to access her ability to be with her feelings, with compassion and empathy. Anything else would just perpetuate the struggle that was playing itself out in her body.

Like so many survivors of trauma, Susan was caught up in an inner war between the strong emotions of the younger self who went through the trauma and the parts of her that had been set up to contain those emotions. Long ago, at the time of the trauma, the feelings of terror, abandonment, and betrayal had truly been too much for her, and she'd reacted by creating a part of herself whose job it was to contain those feelings as far removed from awareness as possible. Now the long-held emotions were threatening to flood out. How I helped her react to this situation would determine whether she went back to her previous denial and disassociation or began to really heal.

At times, Susan identified with the side of her that was being contained ("I feel like there's a heavy stone sitting on

my chest"), and at other times she identified with the side of her that feared her own emotional intensity ("I can't stand these feelings!"). What she wasn't doing was being a compassionate witness to both sides. I hoped to help her achieve this by facilitating Presence.

Clients who are in Presence with their own emotional experience are neither manipulating that experience nor trying to feel it more intensely—they're just being with the feelings. Unlike relaxation techniques, being in Presence emphasizes the relationship with the emotional experience.

Facilitating Presence

"I don't want to have these feelings!" says Susan. "I know I need to go into them and get through them, but I feel like I'm going to die if I do."

"Yes," I respond sympathetically. "So let's see if I can show you a way to make contact with the feelings in a respectful way that also respects the need to go slow and be safe while you do that. Would that be okay?"

Susan looks relieved and hopeful, and nods her agreement.

"So maybe just take some time to bring your awareness into your body, and invite in a sense of how all this feels there right now."

I'm inviting Susan to allow a felt sense to form. The concept of felt sense comes from the work of noted philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin, one of the key developers of Experiential Psychotherapy. His research into the type of client process that correlates with real change in therapy led to Focusing, which is both a description of an optimum client process and a method for facilitating it. Gendlin showed that clients who were aware of a felt sense during the session and were able to stay in touch with it had significantly more positive outcomes from therapy than clients who merely talked about their problems or their emotions.

A felt sense is a freshly forming, holistic sense that has a more-than-words-can-say quality to it. For example, let's say you're afraid. Probably you know why; that is, you know what situation in your life is causing the fear: that upcoming presentation, perhaps, or



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your parent's illness. But one fear is not like another. If you pause and sense directly, a specific fear will be "like but-

terflies," or "a cold stone in the stomach," or "a deer in the headlights." And as you sense the fear directly, even the phrase "a cold stone in the stomach" doesn't capture it all—there's a sense of "yes, and more than that." If you slow down and keep sensing, remaining interested and curious, you'll find out a lot about yourself that may surprise you and, when you do, the body feeling will release and change.

Gendlin's research showed direct contact with a felt sense in the body allows clients to sense the fresh, in-the-moment quality in which new possibilities for life choices are available. This is why he writes, "Even a moment of feeling it in the body allows it to change."

So I invite Susan to sense where she feels the emotions in her body at that moment, and then I wait. I'd know in a moment whether she's one of those clients who get felt senses easily, or whether my job was going to be harder.

After a pause, Susan says, "A tension in my head. And something in my back," and I know we're going to be okay.

I say, "So you might acknowledge each of those two places, as though you're saying to each one, 'Yes, I know you're there.'" Acknowledging is a key move in facilitating Presence. When you acknowledge something that you feel, it's clear that you aren't identified with the feeling and you aren't pushing it away. Every time I invite a client to acknowledge or say hello to something that he or she feels, I'm facilitating Presence.

Susan no longer looks ready to fall apart. Her attention is drawn inward; she's intent and absorbed. She looks like she's doing what I suggested and that her sense of Presence is growing. After a few moments I add, "And you might notice if your awareness is especially drawn to one of those places right now."

"It's my back," Susan says.

"So you might take some time to

describe where and what you're feeling in your back."

"I feel it in my lower left back. It feels heavy, dull, and black."

Describing a felt experience has two purposes for Susan. It reinforces being in Presence, because she's describing rather than evaluating, analyzing, controlling, withdrawing, or reacting. And because the felt sense has a quality of being more than the words that symbolize it, the process of describing brings her into direct contact with this sense of "more than," from which new meanings can emerge.

Now I want to reflect back Susan's description so her sense of direct contact can deepen. I reflect back slowly, "You're sensing . . . something in your lower left back feeling heavy . . . dull . . . black . . ."

Notice what I didn't say. I didn't say, "Your lower left back feels heavy, dull, and black." Why not? What's the difference? Although at first glance the two sentences seem near enough alike to make no difference, I'm actually using language very carefully to evoke and invite Presence. I start my sentence with "You're sensing." In doing so, I'm speaking directly to Presence. I'm inviting Susan to be in Presence—to be sensing the feeling, rather than being identified with it or pushing it away.

Next I say, "something in your lower left back." The word *something* holds and points to the felt sense quality of the experience—the more-than-words, open-ended quality. Finally, I say the adjectives she used to describe her felt sense slowly, with a pause after each one, to invite her to check them with her inner felt experience.

So again, not: "Your lower left back feels heavy, dull, and black." But rather: "You're sensing . . . something in your lower left back feeling heavy . . . dull . . . black . . ."

Susan responds, "That's exactly right!" Then I invite her to acknowledge that place, "Like you're saying 'Yes, I know you're there.'" We don't acknowledge just once, but over and over. Each time, Presence is strengthened.

Susan gasps, and her hand moves to her chest. "When I do that, I get this overwhelming sensation here!" I'm not

surprised that acknowledging one place or aspect in her experience has brought up something else. I've learned to trust this natural movement of the process. All I need to do is continue to support Susan in being in Presence with what comes up.

"So you might move your awareness to something strong you're feeling in your chest, and acknowledge it as well. Maybe sensing how you'd describe it."

"I'm feeling really, really afraid," she says.

Notice that Susan has moved from describing her experience to identifying with it. The clue is that she says "I'm feeling" instead of "it's feeling." So I'm going to reflect with Presence language ("you're sensing . . .") to invite her back into Presence. We'll see if she takes the invitation.

"You're sensing something in you," I say, "that's really, really afraid."

"Yes . . . and it's also sad . . . and lonely . . ." I'm happy to hear Susan shifting back from "I" to "it" to describe the feeling place. This signals to me that she's moving back into Presence. I'm going to support her and encourage Presence by offering another kind of acknowledgment: an invitation to hear or listen to the inner something that she's being with.

"Maybe you could let it know you hear how afraid it is, how sad it is, how lonely it is. . . ."

"Wow!" says Susan. "I'm doing that, and it says that's right and it has a lot more to tell me!" Susan's face is alive with amazement, and her voice sounds bright and excited for the first time.

Notice what a special moment this is. An inner experience that started out as something physically described ("overwhelming sensation") has come alive with its own point of view, its own meaning. "It says it has a lot more to tell me!" By being in relationship with her inner experience, Susan has facilitated an inner shift. Imagine how much harder this would have been coming from the stance of "I'm feeling afraid."

What did I do to help this shift happen? I used Presence language in reflecting back what she said. When Susan said, "I'm feeling really, really afraid," I said, "You're sensing something in you that's really, really afraid."

Compare this to just reflecting what she said: "You're feeling really, really afraid." Although offering empathy is often helpful, in this case a direct reflection without Presence language would have made her feel more overwhelmed. Then I'd have had to intervene in other ways that might have taken her farther from the sensing process itself. Although it uses more words, Presence language gives clients support in finding a solid place to stand in relationship to what they're feeling, and a way to be *with*, rather than *in*, their inner experiencing.

Where Presence Leads

I facilitate Presence throughout the session. A little later, when this "something" in her lets her know that it has a lot more to tell her, Susan reacts from another part of herself: "I'm scared to hear it tell me more, I don't know what that might be."

Now we come to a very revealing point in our understanding of Presence. Again Susan is saying that she's afraid. Earlier, when she said she was afraid, she was identified with the part of her in her chest (the "overwhelming sensation"). By acknowledging it instead of identifying with it, she was able to move into a different, more healing, relationship with it. Now she's saying that she's afraid of the part of herself that she's sensing.

People do shift in identification within a single session; in fact, this is quite common. You may hear a client say, "I'm angry. I hate this anger." This is a shift from identifying with the anger to identifying with hating the anger. Facilitating Presence involves helping a client be with both the anger and the hatred of the anger.

In Susan's case, I want to help her be in Presence with this part of her that's afraid. Here's what I say: "Sounds like another part of you is coming up now,



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something in you that's scared to hear this one tell more."

"Yes," said Susan. "That's right." And she gives a deep sigh of relief. Relief often comes just from feeling that we've been heard.

"Maybe you could acknowledge this something in you that's scared to hear this other one tell more."

"Yes, it's okay," Susan said. "I can listen now."

In this case, I'm happy to see that acknowledgment is all that's needed for the scared part to release, so attention can come back again to the part waiting to be heard.

Wanting Susan to stay connected at the body level, I say, "You might notice how all that is feeling now in your body." A steady contact with body awareness grounds the work and ensures that the person remains in touch with something actually felt, which can be checked up on. From this relationship with the felt sense, real change will come.

"I can feel that place in my back again. It's feeling tight and a little nauseous."

I reflect this using Presence language, speaking the key words slowly so she's invited to check them against her body feeling.

Susan says: "I should have fought back." I assume she's talking about the molestation by her grandfather. The concept of Presence tells me that these words come from something in her, not from all of her, so I respond, "Something in you says, 'I should have fought back.'"

Susan's face twists in disgust. "I hate myself for not fighting back."

We can tell from Susan's face and her words that she's identified again. A well-meaning therapist might be tempted at this stage to reassure her that it's understandable for a small person not to fight back against overwhelming force. But when she's in Presence, Susan knows that already. Telling her that it's understandable that she didn't fight back will reinforce her identification with a younger aspect of herself. Instead, I give her some help to come into Presence with the part of her she's identified with, as well as the part of her it's reacting to.

"See if it would be okay to say it this way, if it would feel true if you'd say, 'I'm sensing something in me that hates . . . something else in me . . . for not fighting back.'"

Susan repeated the words the way I'd suggested, and then said, "Yes, that's true. Something in me hates something in me. I can feel the hating in my back."

"You're sensing it feels like hating, there in your back."

"Not exactly like hating . . . more like fighting. It wants to fight."

This is another exciting moment—one I've learned to expect. As Susan senses directly what she'd called "hating," it becomes "fighting"—or perhaps it was that all along. This is happening because she's in direct contact with the felt sense, from Presence. If she were talking about the feeling from her head, this type of shift would be unlikely.

I want to support her in remaining in a listening relationship with the part of her that now feels like fighting. "You might see if it's okay to stay with that something in you, in your back, that feels like fighting, and listen more to what it's feeling."

"It feels fierce. It wants to punch and hit."

"You're sensing it feels fierce. It's letting you know it wants to punch and hit. You might let it know you hear it."

Notice that I'm continuing to frame my reflections in Presence language. This supports Susan in being with what she's contacting. Then I give a suggestion which supports Presence and Inner Relationship: "You might let it know you hear it." We can tell by what she says next that Susan follows my suggestion.

"It's saying to me, 'Why have you never listened to me before?'"

I smile as I respond, "Sounds like it would have wanted you to listen before. You might let it know you hear that, that it would have wanted you to listen like this a long time ago."

"Yes, that's exactly right. It's telling me that there's a lot it wants me to know that could really help me. It wanted to tell me a long time ago. This is amazing!"

And so the session continues.

AT THE END OF THE SESSION, Susan looks deeply relaxed. Her whole face has changed, looking both softer and stronger, with a kind of inner glow. No wonder: her emotional parts related to different feelings in her body have been heard by her, not pushed away or identified with. Instead of getting caught up in her emotions and feeling them too intensely, she's been able to be a compassionate witness to her own felt experiences. Because she could be in Presence, the feeling places in her have begun to feel some relief, and she's started building a trusting inner relationship with the parts of her that, as it turned out, not only wanted to tell her about distress, but also had helpful information they were waiting to give her about healing that distress.

The next day I received this email: "I want to thank you again for our session last night. When I worked with you, I finally felt like change was possible, that I can move through incredibly painful things and finally find myself again. I had hope. I feel quite horrible today, but I wonder if we kept working, if I could learn to listen to that while feeling safe, and heal it. Part of me feels worse, but part of me feels better."

I smiled when I read this. It's such a privilege to be part of someone's courageous recovery. I wasn't surprised that part of her felt worse—she'd gained the inner strength to be more aware of feelings she'd been exiling for a long time. What especially pleased me was reading that she "finally felt like change was possible." That kind of realistic hope can make all the difference. And if Susan can continue to receive support in practicing the delicate, highly conscious discernment that's at the core of Focusing, discovering how to listen to her intense feelings while feeling safe, her new belief in the possibility of change will prove to be well-founded. ■

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