

# Using Focusing in Emotion-Focused Therapy: A Therapist Interview Study

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A Focusing Project Report

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## Introduction

My interest in Focusing was sparked during my training in Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT). Robert Elliott, our trainer, introduced us to Focusing and to Ann Weiser Cornell's books. I felt drawn to Focusing and I bought Ann's books. The book *The Power of Focusing* had a deep experiential impact on me and I immediately knew that I had to attend Ann's seminars. I started with the foundational courses (The Path to Lasting Change 1 and 2) and then I felt that the next right step for me was to do the Certification course and to become an Inner Relationship Focusing professional.

As I was learning Focusing and immersing myself more and more in it, I started using it a lot in my own practice. At the same time I had many questions about integrating Focusing in clinical practice, and especially in EFT. I was reading the books but what I wanted to find out was what other therapists did in their day-to-day work with their clients. Especially, I was very curious to learn what other EFT therapists did, and how they used Focusing in their practice. And that's how the idea for this research project came about.

I decided that the best way to pursue this idea was to do a qualitative research, interviewing experienced EFT therapists. It is a project that is still underway as I am writing this report. The findings that I present here are drawn from the first four interviews and, therefore, they are not final but tentative. Until now I have already interviewed three more people and the integration of the data from these interviews will probably change the final account of the findings. However, I feel that the themes that I report here bring out the essential qualities of the respondent's accounts.

I will begin this report by giving a broad overview of Emotion-Focused Therapy and of the role of Focusing in it, as it is described in the basic textbooks of the approach. Then, I will briefly present the methodology I used and the findings from the first four interviews. Finally, I will conclude by describing what I have learned from this study.

## What is Emotion-Focused Therapy

Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) is an integrative, humanistic, and experiential therapy incorporating Person-centred and Gestalt therapies and Focusing (Greenberg et al., 1993; Elliott et al., 2004; Elliott & Greenberg, 2021). It is also based on modern theories of emotion, attachment and dialectical constructivism. It has been developed in the 1980s out of a number of empirical studies on the process of change in psychotherapy, and it has been found effective for several psychological difficulties such as depression, anxiety and trauma (Greenberg, 2010).

In EFT emotion is believed to be fundamentally useful, helping people orient to their environment, process information, access their needs and prepare them for action. Therefore it is necessary to promote both survival and well-being. However, when we ignore or avoid our emotions, we cannot take their useful information to guide us through life. Emotions can also become unhelpful and problematic or the source of a lot of pain because of painful or traumatic past experiences. Emotion-Focused Therapy helps people access and process their emotions and develop their emotional

intelligence so that they can solve their problems, improve their relationship with themselves and others, and increase their well-being (Elliott et al., 2004).

In practice, EFT rests on a Person-centred relational base with the therapist being empathically attuned, accepting, genuine and present in the therapeutic relationship. At the same time it is very active using Gestalt therapy tasks to help clients access, activate and process emotions (Elliott et al., 2004). A metaphor that is often used to give its flavor is that it is like “islands of work in an ocean of empathy” (Greenberg & Goldman, 2019). Emotion-Focused therapists are always striving to be empathically attuned to their clients, understanding and affirming them, and at the same time they are listening carefully for markers of specific kinds of processing difficulties. When they become aware of such a marker, they employ specific therapeutic processes to help clients resolve these difficulties. The different therapeutic processes are called therapeutic tasks and a number of them have been developed through rigorous research on what successful clients do when they resolve a particular issue.

## **Focusing in Emotion-Focused Therapy**

Focusing is an important part of Emotion-Focused Therapy. It was adapted for EFT by Robert Elliott from the work of Gendlin and other Focusing teachers (Elliott et al., 2004). It was one of the first six tasks that were developed and described in the book that originally articulated the approach (Greenberg et al., 1993). Moreover, EFT has incorporated the concept of experiencing as one of its cornerstones and many studies have been carried out (e.g. Pos & Choi, 2019) using the Experiencing Scale (Klein et al., 1986).

Focusing is increasingly recognized as an essential part of EFT (Elliott & Greenberg, 2021; Greenberg, 2021). Also, recently, Melissa Harte and her colleagues developed an expanded version of the Focusing task which is designed to reprocess emotional pain relating to unresolved painful or traumatic events (Harte et al., 2020a, 2020b). They developed a method for bringing previously suppressed or incomplete memories of painful events back into awareness through activating the felt sense so they can be successfully processed and integrated.

Textbooks of the approach (e.g. Elliott et al., 2004; Elliott & Greenberg, 2021) describe Focusing as a valuable process that can be used in many ways. One way is to use the complete Focusing process as a therapeutic task when clients experience unclear feelings, when they are confused about what they feel, or they have a complex or troubling sense (Elliott & Greenberg, 2021). Therapists can also use the full Focusing task when their clients are not in touch with their experience, talking in an external or conceptual way, or when they feel blank or stuck. In this task, the therapist helps their client to embrace the focusing attitude toward the unclear feeling, an attitude that includes acceptance, compassion, patience, and curiosity (Elliott & Greenberg, 2021). They also help the client stay with and explore the unclear feeling using questions and invitations until they come up with an accurate symbolization. Finally they encourage the client to receive the felt shift and carry it forward outside therapy.

Apart from the complete Focusing task, therapists can use the Focusing steps, exploratory questions, and invitations separately, to help clients access their experience during other therapeutic processes and tasks. Therapists are also encouraged to take the Focusing attitude towards their clients' experience and to use Focusing to educate clients about basic experiential concepts when they first begin therapy.

Focusing is considered such an important and broad process that Elliott and Greenberg (2021) recommend that therapists learn the focusing task to strengthen their overall EFT practice.

## **The research project**

According to the textbooks Focusing is a necessary and useful part of Emotion-Focused Therapy and it can be used in multiple ways. But what do EFT therapists actually do in their therapeutic encounters with clients? This was the curiosity behind the idea for this project. I especially wanted to learn from therapists who had extensive experience in EFT. Thus my research question was formulated as follows: How do experienced, certified EFT therapists use Focusing in their sessions with clients?

## **Participants**

In order to answer my research question I first approached EFT therapists that I already knew and invited them to give me interviews. I also asked them to recommend other therapists that might be interested in my topic so that I could interview them too.

This report is based on the interviews of the first four therapists that agreed to participate. All participants have extended experience in EFT, practicing it from seven to nineteen years. Three of them are trainers and one is a supervisor. They all had some formal Focusing training. Ashley and Brenda had also been trained in the Untangling method by Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara McGavin. Deborah has had only a three-day Focusing seminar during her EFT training, but she has read Ann Weiser Cornell's books and uses them extensively. Ashley has a regular ongoing personal focusing practice with focusing partners, while Brenda and Chris used to have in the past but not anymore. Deborah is using her own focusing process but she has no formal focusing practice with a partner.

All names are pseudonyms.

This information is also presented in table A.

Table A. Participants professional characteristics

Name	Years practicing EFT	EFT status	Formal focusing training	Ongoing personal focusing practice
Ashley	7	Supervisor	Yes (classical focusing and untangling)	Yes
Brenda	12	Trainer	Yes (classical focusing and untangling)	No (yes in the past for 10 years)
Chris	15	Trainer	Yes (classical focusing)	No (yes in the past)
Deborah	19	Trainer	Yes (3 days classical focusing)	Kind of ("free style")

### Interview guide

In order to answer my research question, I developed an interview guide with three broad domains of investigation. The first domain has to do with the way therapists use Focusing in their practice and includes the following questions:

- How do you use focusing in your practice with clients?
- When do you use focusing? Which markers? Which clients? / Are there any markers or situations where you find focusing more useful?
- Have you ever used focusing as an alternative to other tasks (e.g. chair work)? / Are you using the exact steps in the textbook task? How are you using it? Are you using it in novel ways?
- Have you changed in your use of focusing as you have grown as an EFT therapist?

The second broad domain explores therapists' understanding about how the focusing process fits into the EFT change process and the third domain examines whether they feel that Focusing should be developed further in EFT practice and training and in which ways.

### Data analysis

In order to analyze the data, I used a descriptive-interpretive qualitative approach (Elliott & Timulak, 2021). First, I prepared the data transcribing all interviews and dividing the transcripts into meaning units, i.e. units of data ranging from a short sentence to a paragraph, capable of communicating a complete idea. Next, I clustered meaning units according to their similarities, creating categories which subsumed

comparable meaning units. I also combined related categories into higher order categories. I followed this process for each interview separately and then I combined all data together, creating a hierarchy of categories and subcategories.

## Findings

In this report I present the tentative findings for the first domain of investigation, namely the way EFT therapists use Focusing in their practice. Through analysis of the data I created three main categories, each containing a number of subcategories

The three main categories are: (a) Integrating Focusing in EFT work, (b) Focusing as the experiential foundation of EFT, and (c) Idiosyncratic adaptations of Focusing. Below I am presenting each category and its subcategories in detail.

### Integrating focusing in EFT work

All participants mentioned that they integrate Focusing in their EFT work in several ways and they specified a number of different Focusing processes that they use. Furthermore, some participants explained that they use these processes to facilitate emotion work and the other therapeutic tasks. Finally, some participants described how they integrate these processes in the complete work using EFT theory to guide them.

#### 1. Different ways of using Focusing in EFT

Participants shared that they use three different Focusing processes in their practice with clients. The first of these processes is the complete Focusing task when there is a marker, especially the unclear feeling marker. With the exception of Ashley, all the other participants admitted that they use the task rarely. Chris shares, for example:

*So it's actually I need to answer this in two ways. So if you really, if your question would be do you use, like the focusing as a big task like it's written in the learning EFT book or like Gendlin talks about it or like uh, Ann Weiser Cornell? So that that would be like going through all the steps right from, there's a marker and you go through all the steps up until the end, like the felt shift. So I barely use that.*

Even though they do not use the Focusing task often, all participants revealed that they use the Focusing steps and invitations a lot. They interweave the Focusing invitations with empathic work or with the more active therapeutic tasks. For example, Ashley describes how she is integrating these invitations in the dialogue with the client:

*Sometimes I've also started doing a kind of in between thing, where we'll be talking and then we'll kind of slide into it and you know I'll say, yeah, let's just stay with that for a bit, and without you know getting consent and doing a lead-in, we'll just say, OK, we would just slide into a bit of focusing here and just see and then the ones who know it will just do that naturally, kind of as it's kind of an in between thing, yeah.*

The last Focusing process that therapists use is the Focusing attitude, the attitude of not knowing, of curiosity, acceptance, tentativeness, and openness to what comes. Deborah believes this attitude is “unbelievably important in EFT” and she always reminds herself to take it. She also emphasizes this attitude to her teaching:

*So I think the most important thing for us in teaching is the attitude and I'm really stressing that right? If I say, even if you never do focusing in your practice, but do adopt this attitude and it's more this thing right, to sit with it, to get to know it better, to be accepting, to be interested, right, and to trust the felt sense. So that stuff I'm trying to teach people and it's not a technique, but it's an attitude of waiting, of being present, not having words yet and open and receptive.*

## **2. Using focusing to facilitate EFT work**

Most participants said that they use Focusing to facilitate emotion work in general and also the other therapeutic tasks in EFT, such as two chair work. So, for example, when clients get stuck in a chair work task, they use Focusing invitations, or some steps from the Focusing task, to help them access their internal experience. When clients manage to access their internal experience and their process unblocks, therapists continue with the first task. Ashley describes that process:

*And then this kind of the other ones where I'll do a mixture, maybe I'll start with maybe I'll do some EFT stuff and then I'll see where we get stuck and then I'll think, oh maybe we should do a bit focusing here and press on that point and see if we can more intensely internally, that and then I'll go back to the chair stuff... afterwards. OK, so it's gonna be a mix...*

Two participants (Ashley and Chris) also mentioned that they use Focusing as a substitute for chair work, when clients do not want to work in that way or when it is difficult for them. When clients are having trouble remaining present with the intense emotions that are evoked by working with chair enactments, or with clients with Dissociative Identity Disorder, a chair task would not be appropriate. In these cases they use Focusing. Chris describes how Focusing can be helpful:

*I think they should be incorporated because not all clients want to do chair work, and focusing does a kind of chair work without chairs. So I think it's more, I think it's more powerful when you can do the chair work, but sometimes it's not possible and then and then what do we do, right?*

## **3. EFT as the overarching framework**

Two participants (Brenda and Deborah) explained how EFT gives them the context for the use of Focusing and the theoretical background into which Focusing is integrated. EFT theory guides their practice of Focusing and helps them to know what they are doing and what they need to do next. This is well illustrated by Deborah:

*I think in EFT it is quite important to really, really understand the theory and to really know, so what's my red thread and what's my next little tiny step like for example, for focusing to get them more in touch with what is actually there or to express a bit more and then I do become creative. I have in mind, OK, what's my*



*next step? What is it in the processing that is sort of stuck and where do I have to move? And then I do use it creatively just bring it in or definitely not follow the steps always as they are spelled out.*

For Brenda Focusing is part of a “powerful toolbox” which she uses to facilitate her client’s process. EFT gives her the essential background to know when she needs to use each of these tools. Through the interview she realized how much she integrates Focusing in her work:

*I use focusing more integrated in the complete work, and it's strange because focusing oriented psychotherapy is focusing integrated. But it's as if I, I don't know, maybe you can like if you're a carpenter you can make very beautiful closets, but now we are in the in the master class. So there's specific tools and maybe there are 10 more or less the same tools, but now it's more specific. Yeah, it's integrative more, and yeah, I do think that I use focusing as a big task less, because there is so much focusing all the time. That's a great conclusion. More deliberate. I know what I'm doing.*

## **Focusing as the experiential foundation of EFT**

One of the themes that I kept noticing in the participants’ accounts is that Focusing provides the experiential base of EFT, both for therapists themselves and their clients.

### **1. Helping clients connect with their bodily felt experience**

All participants shared that they use Focusing to help their clients get in touch with their bodily felt experience. They feel this is very important, especially when the clients are “too much in their head, or just going in circles, or just intellectualizing” (Brenda). They use it with “people who talk a lot about situations” (Brenda), or with clients “who cannot do it very well or they’re just very disconnected” (Chris). So what do they do with these clients? Brenda shares that she invites them to feel in their body:

*...sometimes what I really really like is when I think people are too much in their head or just going in circles or just intellectualising? I like this phrase so much to say, oh well, they talk about work and ra-ra-ra-just to say every, just, OK, OK everything, everything about work. Mm-hmm what does it bring in your body, what's happening in your body. If you just put it over there and you look at it, everything about, what's happening in the body? And then let's see what wisdom of the body has to say. I'll maybe I love that even more because then people are not absolutely not, they are here [showing the head]. And that's a wonderful way to...[showing a movement of going down]*

Chris also describes how he helps the clients who are not in touch with their experience slow down, take time and stay with something. He invests time to help clients learn this:

*So I might help him there, I might say OK, can we just? Can we take a moment? Can we take a pause here? Can we break? Can we have some silence and just stay with it? And so I help him, I think a lot of times I try to help him build this, I think,*

*right? To just stay with whatever there is and maybe it's not clear it's unclear, it's vague, but that's completely OK, so I think I invest a lot of time in those interventions, right?*

Apart from helping clients access their bodily felt experience, most therapists explained how they use Focusing to help clients access their emotions. They recounted how some clients are cut off from their emotions or how, as Deborah describes below, they get in touch and then run away very quickly. With these clients she uses Focusing:

*And I also use it when people just go around in circles or when they talk to like when they always tend to [...] an issue and then walk away from it quickly. So let's say you get them to, uh, to a topic that's important, they talk about a scene that was emotionally activating, they go to it and then they sort of get in touch with their emotions, but they tend to run away very quickly and then get lost in a next time tangent and then their voice becomes external again and their focus is lost. So with these clients I do use focusing.*

Ashley also mentioned that she uses Focusing when clients are over regulated and distance themselves from their emotions. Below she explains what she does in these cases:

*And if it's like over regulated and the person it's like the... Then I think it's very helpful and I think it's like you need to teach them in baby steps how to look within and how to not just say oh there's nothing there. And to take seriously what's there and to say, well, what kind of nothing, is it a blank nothing? Is it a wide open space, nothing, is it? Kind of help them or oh so you're just feeling really relaxed. "In fact, no, no, no." And then just helping them take it seriously, even.*

## **2. Focusing as the empathic foundation of the therapist**

All participants shared that they are using a Focusing process themselves when they listen to clients, and this process becomes the foundation of their empathy. Focusing helps them stay with what the client is saying, resonate with the client's experience in their own body, find the right words and express them, as is beautifully illustrated by Brenda:

*[...] also, in empathy, there's focusing. I understand so much more if I walk in your shoes and I resonate with what, how it is to be you and I try to experience. There's another human being. Walking in your shoes and I resonate and I resonate and I find words and I do an empathic expression. It's focusing. I can never ever I can be empathetic with you, I can resonate, but to find the words... So like in the empathy cycle I decenter, I enter your world, I see what's poignant, I resonate, I see what's poignant and I express it. It's focusing. It is focusing, yeah. I think you cannot never ever do be very empathic or do a do a very touching empathic conjecture without this resonating, finding the right words and express it. So, EFT helped me to feel the depth of empathy and the empathy is not, it's so much also in the resonating, and what do I feel walking in your shoes? What can I feel and what words fit?*

Chris describes how the Focusing attitude is his empathic base and how he uses his own felt sense to resonate with his clients:

*I would say the focusing attitude would be a little bit like my empathic base so I use it too. So what I'm doing right now, right? I'm trying to [showing his head]. I'm trying to [showing his stomach], you know, and then I go into this and I'm looking at this and I'm trying to and so this is what I'm doing a lot with clients also. So I'm using my own felt sense I think a lot. To be empathetic towards the client or stuff like this...*

## **Idiosyncratic adaptations of Focusing**

The last category has to do with the personal factors that influence how much and how therapists use Focusing processes. Their personal journey, and especially where they are in that journey, shapes their preferences and the way they use it. Clients' preferences or appropriateness also influence their use of it.

### **1. Using Focusing in a personal way**

All participants shared that either they use Focusing in their own personal way or they might use it creatively. Some describe how they don't follow the exact steps that are spelled out in the textbooks. Instead, they use what they have learned, what they find easier or what they like. For example, Deborah shares that she uses and also teaches what she finds easier:

*I found the easiest way to teach people is to simply use Ann Weiser Cornell steps. I mean there is, the overlap is 95% but it's just better spelled out, the sentences are better spelled out. It's easier to learn and it's easier to communicate, so I actually do use those steps by Ann Weiser Cornell.*

Participants also mentioned that they might use creative variations in the task or mix the task with other tasks. Some also talked about using the task in their own way, like Brenda:

*Different, I think when I see a marker for focusing or when I really start focusing I've got the idea that I do it more in my own way. Like more the way I learned it the Gendlin way or the Ann Weiser Cornell way and just focusing, and I really think I take much more time then. To find the right handle, to resonate and to take time and stay there and say hello or welcome it or see what happens and just notice.*

### **2. Therapist preference for Focusing**

One of the themes that stood out in the analysis of the interviews is that previous experiences of Focusing and idiosyncratic preferences shape how and how much they use the Focusing task. Factors such as where they are in their development as an EFT therapist, when they have learned Focusing, whether they have a successful experience with using Focusing with a client, or whether they recently had some course in Focusing, affect how much they use it. For example, Ashley, who had just finished a course in Focusing found herself using it more and more:

*...and then when I started getting interested in focusing that kind of ooohhhppp, the proportion just rose and it's....Yeah, and it's partly because I'm really interested in and it's really helpful and I find it really relaxing to do. [...] It, it brings a lot of results and it's also actually much more pleasant for me as well, so I kind of find myself using it more and more and more and most of the time it's really helpful.*

Deborah also shares how a successful use of Focusing with a client reminds her to use it more often:

*And then I might have a session with the client again doing focusing which really goes well, and then I'm sort of almost reminded of "you should use this more often, more intentionally", and then there are phases when I use it more often more intensively...*

Both Brenda and Chris, who were Focusing-oriented therapists before becoming EFT therapists, shared that they used it less because they preferred more active tasks. As Brenda said:

*See I know I don't find them so often [the markers for focusing], but I'm also absolutely sure that, uh, you know, very explicit marker, of course I'll do it, but like with the two chairs, people just talk talk and I sense the marker and I wanna go there. And then it's quite implicit, but I'm going to make it explicit because I want to go there, and I think with the markers clearing space and focusing, it's very explicit of course, but I think I'm not so much wanting to go there if it's like implicit. Trying to make it more explicit and do it, I don't know.*

### **3. Client appropriateness for focusing**

Some participants mentioned that client factors sometimes influence their use of the Focusing task, such as when a client seems to like or prefer it. For example, Ashley mentioned that she uses the task with clients who were used to focusing or who work better internally or who "just very much take to the focusing". Chris also shared how he uses the complete Focusing task in every session with one specific client:

*I think I use that [the full focusing task] like for now I have one client that I use it every session. Because he wanted to do EMDR, and I I'm not so very keen on EMDR. And so I did, I did focusing, and he liked that very much. So we're doing this. He comes in, he talks a little bit, closes his eyes and then he goes into his body and then we do all the focusing steps [...] I think he knows a little bit about focusing and when I did like for instance when I asked him, can you feel that? Can you feel it in your body? Is it somewhere in your body? And he goes like into more like he goes like this, and so he's already prepped a little bit, right? So and then it's easier to just go through all the steps, uh, and also I think because I did some brain spotting with him before that. And that's very much focusing like, I think it's very much like focusing so he was used to that so. Uhm, so that then, uh, it's easy to use it as a big task I think.*

## Conclusion

This study has been really valuable for me and I have learned many things. Most important is the experience of talking with other EFT therapists and asking them to describe what they do in their work. Their interviews inspired me and also affirmed my own experiences, showing me I am not alone in what I feel and do.

Here I will try to summarize what I have learned until now. An important learning is that for the therapists I interviewed, Focusing is a foundational part of their EFT practice. Although they do not use the Focusing task very often, they integrate the micro-processes and steps in their overall work, to help clients access their experience and emotions and to facilitate the other tasks. What is interesting is that it is so interweaved in their practice that some of them hadn't realized before the interview how much they are using it. Answering the questions helped them make their implicit experience explicit. What emerges then is that Focusing is providing EFT its experiential foundation.

What I also picked up from these interviews is that Focusing alone is not the therapy and that therapists need a theoretical framework and a methodology to guide their therapeutic practice. Focusing is embedded in this framework and its micro-processes are used extensively to forward the therapeutic process.

Another important learning is that Focusing is essential to both the client and the therapist. Therapists use it to help clients ground to their experience and access and productively process their emotions (all key processes in EFT). At the same time it is fundamental to therapists' empathic attunement to their clients. I believe that this finding has important implications for the training of therapists, as some of my respondents have already suggested. It can be used in the trainings to help new EFT therapists become more experiential and sharpen their empathic resonance.

The therapists I interviewed reported that they use Focusing both as it is outlined in the texts and in creative, idiosyncratic ways. They shared that, as it is already mentioned in the textbooks, they use the task (albeit rarely), the micro-processes and the attitude. They also use it to teach clients about the nature of experiencing and how to approach it. At the same time, they confessed (some even feeling guilty about it) that they do not use it exactly as it is in the textbooks, but they make creative adaptations of it. They revealed that they are using processes they have learned outside their formal EFT trainings or using it in other situations than those described. But as my Focusing co-mentor Emily Agnew told me in a personal communication after my presentation of the project, this seems to be "the edge" where "the craft of doing a modality meets the art of it". I totally agree and I feel that this creativity is essential to both the spirit of Focusing and to the art of therapy. This learning has been truly liberating.

These are only some of the learnings – much more is implicit and need time and engagement with all the interviews in order to become explicit. The last thing I want to say is that I am very happy that I chose this project and that I feel enthusiastic about where it might take me – I am sure it will be forward!

## A note of gratitude

I am very grateful to Robert Elliott who is supporting and supervising me in this project. He has helped me formulate the interview schedule, guided me in the analysis, and provided useful feedback. I also feel deep gratitude to all my participants who gave me the gift of their precious time and shared their valuable experiences with me. Finally, I want to say a big thank you to my co-mentors, Ann Weiser Cornell and Emily Agnew for supporting me in this journey.

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