

Focusing and Bodywork: An Informal Exploration

by Ruth Hirsch

Combining Focusing with bodywork can have the wonderful result of enhancing the therapeutic potentials of both. This article will briefly describe my work and some of the benefits of combining the two modalities.

The basic modality that I use is acupuncture. I also use Cranial Sacral Therapy, and, occasionally, chakra balancing techniques. Each of these forms is highly congruent with the pace and philosophy of Focusing. Each is non-intrusive, subtle, gentle and respectful. Each is adapted, moment-by-moment, according to what is happening in the present for the recipient. Each is effective not only at the physical level, but also at emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels of experience. In contrast to many forms of bodywork, my work is done with the client fully clothed. My approach is similar to that of a Focusing oriented therapist — I view my role as that of a facilitator. I trust that it is the client/Focuser alone who ultimately knows what his/her truth is.

Every session differs based on a combination of the client's stated needs, and on what I sense, both intuitively and in my own body, might be useful at the time. Some of the issues which clients have asked for help with include: dealing with chronic pain, addressing specific health complaints, gaining clarity regarding the most appropriate next steps with regards to a particular project or issue, as an adjunct to psychotherapy, addressing blocks to losing weight and/or to exercising, attaining relief from painful, obsessive thinking, helping with various aspects of dealing with cancer.

Adding bodywork to a Focusing session can enhance the Focusing in several ways:

1. Appropriate, sensitive touch can significantly increase a sense of safety, and thus decrease inhibitions which might deter Focusing at any stage of the session. Touch can be, at different times, both highly comforting, and highly threatening. Before I touch a client, I tune into

my own sense of what this person needs to feel safe, and the kind of touch that would be most useful in helping them to feel safe. I have had many reports from clients that the quality of my touch has been an important factor in their ability to spend time with painful material.

2. For persons with "too close" process, that is, persons who tend to be easily overwhelmed by aspects of their lives, touch can be extremely helpful in adding a calming dimension which may be useful in either preventing or easing overwhelm.

A related benefit of the combination of Focusing and touch is with clients who "identify" with their feelings. For example, someone might say they are anxious, and have no sense of separation between themselves and this mind state. They identify themselves as anxious, rather than having the sense that they are simply experiencing anxiety. In such a situation, the tactile presence of another person may be helpful to the Focuser in "dis-identifying" from their process — i.e. in being able to differentiate between the feeling and themselves. The dynamic here may be that touch helps the Focuser to relax, and in so doing creates space in which they can then separate out the feeling of anxiety from who they, themselves, are.

A middle-aged man was experiencing intense confusion related to an issue which he had been struggling to resolve for many years. As the session began he immediately began to tell me his story, which involved a painful rejection by someone important to him. Soon after the beginning of the session, as I touched him, he was able to feel a sense of connection with his body, then to sense inside, and then, with ease, to begin to hear from "parts" of himself, and finally, to begin to form a positive relationship with these parts. His body and his being (i.e. his mind, emotions, and spirit) relaxed. His speech became slower. In contrast to the rather anxious monologue he'd previously delivered, there was a sense that he was now able to take the time and space to

listen to the wisdom within his own body. Touch seemed to facilitate the process of this separation, so that he was able to be with what was there, rather than to be overwhelmed by his thoughts and feelings.

When I attempted to introduce this client to Focusing before beginning the bodywork, he was unable to break free from his obsessive thinking in order to bring his attention into his body. What was initially experienced as intense confusion and pain, was, with bodywork and Focusing, experienced as a sad part, a part that felt rejected and hurt. By the end of the first session, without any prompting, he was able to relate his feelings resulting from this rejection to another rejection that had occurred in his life more than fifty years before.

At the end of the session he reported that while none of the material was new for him, he had gained a new understanding of the relative importance to him of the various pieces of information. He now had a sense of how the pieces of information fit together. In addition, he reported a level of understanding and sense of peace within his body that he'd never before experienced.

3. Persons with "distant" process may also be helped by the combination of bodywork and Focusing. Such persons tend to have a much harder time becoming aware of sensations in the body, and thus have a harder time identifying a felt sense. Often, it is harder for them to feel their feelings, and thus they are challenged when they attempt to find a handle or to describe an emotion, aspect of their life, or image which might be associated with the felt sense.

For such people, touch can be extremely helpful in enhancing a relationship with sensations in the body, a step which can facilitate the process of accessing the felt sense's meaning or message. Touch may facilitate the recognition of a connection between the body and emotions by decreasing inhibitions which might be preventing the Focuser from seeing such connections. It can also be helpful in easing the holding in the body which may prevent the Focuser from being aware of emotion. In these ways, bodywork can help a Focuser to be closer to a felt sense (to better identify and then relate

to or interact with the felt sense), so that the relationship which is essential to the Focusing process can be formed.

4. Touch can be helpful with each step of the Focusing process. At the beginning of the session, I use the combination of touch and awareness to assist the client in preparing themselves for Focusing. I may suggest that they might imagine that with the next few exhalations that they are clearing some space for themselves to be able to more easily be with whatever is present, with whatever may be wanting their attention. Even when I say nothing, when I make contact by gently resting my hands on a person's back, that the effect is generally that the recipient takes a few deep breaths, and, energetically, lets go of a noticeable amount of tension held in the body. A decrease in physical tension is generally accompanied by a corresponding decrease in emotional and mental tension. The resulting state permits a Focuser to go within with more ease, and to then successfully use the steps of Focusing.

As described above, touch can also be helpful in becoming aware of sensations first on the surface of the body, then inside the body, and, finally, of sensations which are felt senses. Once a felt sense is identified, holding a particular place in the body where the felt sense is located may facilitate the Focuser's process of describing the felt sense. Through touch which is respectful, unhurried, and compassionate, the Focuser is assisted in holding a similar attitude in relating to the felt sense.

5. A unique advantage of touch therapy is that the practitioner can hold points or areas associated with the emotions which the Focuser attributes to the felt sense. A variety of theories describe points which are said to be associated with various emotions. In my work, I most often draw from Chinese medical theory and basic chakra theory. These theories maintain that energy may be held in such points and areas and may thus not be available to the person. By holding such points, the practitioner can facilitate the release of this energy so that it can be available to the client for healing.

A client expressed sadness as he spoke of the relationship that he had with his mother as a child. He experienced the felt sense in his abdomen. As he spent time with this place, I gently put my hand on

his chest. This is an area believed to be related to issues of the heart, both physical and emotional. As soon as I touched him here, he began to cry, and then reported having a much more detailed sense of the nature of the sadness, which related to his sense that when he was a child, his mother was never able to accept his love.

A practitioner may hold points or areas associated with emotions which the Focuser may not report, but may seem to be logical given the story associated with the felt sense. For example, one client reported a sensation in her chest which she connected with the recent sudden ending of her fifteen year marriage. Up to this time she had expressed sadness, but did not seem to have experienced grieving. As she spent time with the sadness, I gently



pressed an acupressure point on her chest, near the intersection of the clavicle and the arm. This point is known to be useful in facilitating grieving. Upon my holding this point, she was able to express her deep sense of loss.

If the Focuser describes the felt sense as angry, there are several points which might be useful. Holding one or more of these points can have the varying effects of providing the Focuser with more energy with which to deal with the anger, dispelling frustration which often masks anger, and/or facilitating access to other emotions which may be underlying the anger. For instance, if the anger is due to a loss, and the Focuser seems unable to grieve, the point on the chest described above can help to bring enough energy to facilitate grieving. The anger is thus dispelled while the Focuser is able to continue and to deepen his/her relationship with the felt sense.

If the anger is due to frustration, massaging or holding a point on the back, below the scapula and near the spine, or a point on the outside of the thigh, midway between the hip and the knee, may be useful in helping the client to become aware of the frustration. Holding the former point may also be useful in helping the client to spend time with the frustration.

I've talked about adding bodywork to a Focusing session. There are also many benefits to adding Focusing to a bodywork session, at least as many benefits as are inherent in Focusing itself. A key benefit is empathic listening. In addition to helping the Focuser to maintain attention on whatever might be present for him/her, empathic listening also has the effect of modeling for the Focuser attitudes such as acceptance, compassion, and patience. The body worker may also model these attitudes through the quality of touch. Thus, in a session which incorporates both bodywork and Focusing, the focuser receives modeling that is from two sources, the listening and guiding verbal input as well as the therapeutic touch. This double modeling has the effect of helping the Focuser to more easily hold these attitudes toward him or herself on both physical and emotional levels.

Whether someone comes to me initially for bodywork or for Focusing, I can offer the other as well. The benefits of combining the two have convinced me that I want to continue to work in this way, and exploring the healing potential of this combination. ¶

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