

Focusing and Self-Confidence – Weaving a Safety Net for the Soul¹

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Abstract

A hidden curriculum is embedded in the focusing process. It serves to develop the confidence of the focuser. This paper will describe the elements of this hidden curriculum and present an outline for a self-confidence training program in which focusing is a key component.

When I began my career in the 1970's, self-confidence training played a major role in the Women's Rights Movement. Here, my personal and professional interests coincided, and I developed a specialty in the field. Over the years, the theme of my work has remained constant, but the emphasis has shifted. I no longer view self-confidence--or the lack of it--from the perspective of a behavioral therapist. Rather, I employ a person-centered, focusing-oriented approach. I have found that simply learning focusing increases self-esteem. For this reason, I believe that within the focusing process there lies a curriculum, which teaches more than simply how to contact a felt sense. In this paper, I will elaborate on this idea according to the following outline.

- Aspects of focusing that improve self-esteem (or: the hidden curriculum)
- Tools to increase self-confidence
 - Finding one's inner compass
 - Recalibrating one's inner position (True North)
 - Fear needs security and support
 - There is a part of me that knows...
- Weaving a safety net for the soul: seven steps to develop self-confidence
 - Finding security within myself
 - The development of inner certainty
 - Identity – who am I?
 - Facing fear
 - Finding my place in the world

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- Providing room for intuition and fantasy
- Expanding one's territory
- Walking a tightrope

Aspects of focusing that improve self-esteem (or: the hidden curriculum)

When we view focusing abstractly, we notice four implicit truths:

1. The focuser has the capacity to manage her inner needs in a caring way.
2. The focuser has the capacity to establish an inner democracy.
3. In distinction lies the universe.
4. Forward motion will be achieved if all feelings are included and nothing is excluded.

Caring Inner Management

When we focus, we typically adopt the role of the “good mother” or “good therapist”. One part of us is understanding and provides security, another part deals constructively with the more sensitive, child-like self.

Focusing helps individuals develop empathy for themselves. I learn, for example, to listen to myself and be my own friend. I practice treating myself with self-respect while maintaining a healthy inner distance.

This kind of inner relationship allows me to view a problem without drowning in fear. It enables me to deal directly with the problem and leaves room for practical decision-making and spontaneous response.

The Inner Democracy

The phrase “inner democracy” describes an internal culture in which every feeling is given space. No barriers are erected to keep out “unwelcome” feelings. The inner democracy allows room for getting to know one's self and striking deals with parts that want to rebel. The inner democracy presupposes not only that every human being has the right to exist, but also that one's inner world and all its parts should be honored. As democratic leader, the inner self provides a safe place for gatherings and disagreements.

In Distinction Lies the Universe

It is said that the quality of a society can be measured in how it socializes its children. How, for example, do we come to terms with weakness? Are we helpful and supportive or do we hold weakness in contempt and, failing to acknowledge it, let it stand in the way of personal growth? Here the principle of inclusion, beautifully expressed in the word “and” turns traditional binaries on their heads. Bi-polarity, insurmountable differences, battling character traits, these are not just issues of black and white. Between the black and the white are shades of color that allow differences to co-exist, if not live in perfect peace. Contradictions in our inner experience set up an internal battle that we must endure if we want to expand our horizons. Every facet of a human being deserves its space. Even a detested facet deserves to be acknowledged! The principle of inclusion asks one to accept—and even welcome—the multiplicity of experience.

This accepting approach permits me to get to know my inner variety. I may define myself as being “scared”, but I can also find other, subtler descriptors. Taken together, they allow me to experience myself more fully. Perhaps my fear of failure goes hand-in-hand with a wish to try something new. Maybe I find in myself an inner supporter who offers me help when I need it and speaks even more convincingly than my loud-mouthed critic.

Inclusion

We need fear if we are to understand ourselves. Once included in a dialogue, fear leads us to questions such as: “What is needed to solve this problem?” and “What steps can I take to alleviate my discomfort?” If we are open to listening, our fear provides us with solutions.

Our fears point out the worst of things and let us know that something is wrong. If we can accept and even welcome the fear, we can take a major step forward, because fears need to be heard and understood if they are to lessen. Remaining open but at a safe distance from our fear allows us to work with it.

Within our difficult feelings lie the directions for where we need to go. Knowing this, we can experience our feelings as positive. We are allowed—compelled, even—to accept uncertainty. Patience with what is unclear or unpredictable leads us to new insights and prepares us for new experiences. Shy people know insecurity all too well. With focusing, they can overcome insecurities by accepting them. The act of acceptance reveals new possibilities and, as a result,

unpleasant feelings increase in value; they become indicators that signal the beginning of new discoveries.

Thus, focusing mediates between an emerging openness to experience and unaccepted or unwanted feelings, as well as between conflicting strains of a personality. Focusing teaches self-respect, discipline and balance and diminishes self-destructive tendencies. Above all, it provides a way of handling difficult feelings constructively and teaches the value of not knowing; uncertainty is a door leading into the self.

Tools to Improve Self-confidence

Finding an inner compass

Focusing enables the individual to contact an inner-core. If I can relate to my felt sense, I can find a feeling of rightness inside. I can discover my truth, and, in a metaphorical sense, knock on my own door and welcome myself in.

Every one of us has an inner compass. If we listen to ourselves, resonating with the felt sense we will discover whether we're in tune with ourselves. If we are out of tune, we'll feel queasy or ill at ease. This will let us know that we've lost the way. By developing a keen awareness of ourselves, we'll always be able to find the path. Checking inside and receiving feedback from the felt sense, we can determine whether our thoughts, feelings, and actions are congruent with our inner self.

Recalibrating One's Inner Position (True North)

Insecure people tend to dwell on criticisms of themselves. They doubt their competence and give themselves scant support. They have a tendency to believe their actions are controlled by others and to wish to be "rescued" by the outside world. In the end, such people frequently fail because of the paradoxes inherent in this belief system.

Attribution theory would suggest that the insecure individual needs to learn to initiate change, thereby interrupting the cycle and reclaiming control of their lives. In contrast, the focusing attitude proposes that the client needs to move from an external orientation to an internal one and, at the same time, change the tone of his inner dialogue from hypercritical and uncooperative to well-intentioned and open to compromise. Focusing helps the client see himself more fully and set a more realistic standard for his behavior. Experiencing autonomy

in the very process of personal development builds the client's trust in his own ability to solve problems. This aspect of focusing, and the ideas implicit in it, help the individual see himself as competent and trustworthy, a bulwark against the destructive force of the inner critic.

Fear needs security and support

The felt sense is a delicate thing. It requires attention and patience as it slowly makes itself known. Fearful or insecure people often find it difficult to sit with things that feel vague, unstructured or unstable. Uncertainty evokes a fear of failure. Focusing can teach people how to relate to uncertainty, how to let go a little inside, how to notice the nuances in the uncertainty, and how to take action even from a place of instability.

To make changes and conduct experiments requires a safe space inside, one that provides support and offers information about when it is right to take action. In a safe environment, the organism can relax and grow. The safe space is thus the foundation and refuge for individuals testing out new experiences. In such a space, the focusing attitude comes naturally.

“And so we say that we have to treat our inner self like a shy child, which needs our protection, our attention and our understanding: as something which wants to be seen without having to change. Sometimes we can even put our arms around it. Then it will be able to take small steps, grow, and we will be surprised and amazed about its development and often deeply touched.”²

There is a part of me that knows...

People who are experienced with focusing know how to contact a part of themselves that knows “what life should be like” and “what it would feel like if everything was okay.” It is a part of themselves that has deep faith in their own life-giving energy.

In 1996 Gene Gendlin wrote that all humans are born with an “internal blueprint” or “inner matrix.” During the course of a newborn baby's development, for example, the baby's expectations of the world are embedded in its own developmental program. The baby expects its hunger to be met by a caring, capable mother. Above all, the baby expects that it has a right to possess its mother. It is just this kind of match between needs and their fulfillment that we are able to find in ourselves through focusing. Focusing teaches us to make contact

² Quoted from Gene Gendlin in an oral message.

with a part of ourselves that is perfectly intact and serving as the custodian of our natural dignity.

Weaving a safety net for the soul: seven steps to develop self-confidence

Assertiveness training--which is at the heart of behavioral therapy--and a humanistic, person-centered approach, can complement each other in supporting the growth of an individual's self-confidence.

Emotions, thoughts and behaviors are, of course, interrelated. Negative thoughts lead to feelings of sadness, which in turn unleash destructive behaviors. Precise, well-defined thoughts and feelings can prevent this kind of unraveling. This is because learning to listen to our felt sense paves the way to experiencing new depth and substance in our lives. Turning our gaze inward naturally leads to greater self-awareness, self-knowledge, and assuredness. New experiences become possible as we realize that our own body can be a source of creative problem-solving. It happens as if by magic: I achieve a new sensory awareness of myself and the meaning of my life emerges.

Our center of gravity shifts as, with focusing to support us, we become more assertive. Habitual inner attitudes and long-remembered experiences find new frontiers and the self is supported in taking new steps and adopting new behaviors.

My theory is that when self-awareness is increased, self-esteem is also strengthened. This leads to still greater self-awareness, increased confidence and, eventually, the ability to self-regulate. This cycle establishes for the individual a whole new set of feelings about assertiveness; it is no longer associated with fear. Rather, it is associated with personal growth and can be viewed as one's birthright.

A person who knows focusing can be confident. She can trust her inner compass. Not only is she aware of her rights, she is able to claim them. A focuser listens to the voice inside and sees the world through her own eyes. She person takes her cues about what is "right" and what "works best" from within. This allows her to take moderate action. It also enables her to step back and view the problem at hand from a distance. In these ways, the focuser develops a

friendly, constructive inner relationship and remains in touch with the voices inside her. As a result, she is able to exercise self-control, set priorities and take responsibility for her life.

In the following section I will name seven steps that help the individual develop self-confidence. They are an adaptation and elaboration of the focusing steps and are also informed by the content and structure of a women's assertiveness training led by Angelika C. Wagner (1979). Though they are not described in detail here, each step should be accompanied by experiential exercises. The basic objectives of assertiveness training are to enable participants to:

- appreciate their qualities
- define wishes and goals
- develop strategies to improve staying power
- practice alternative ways to combat insecurity
- know their rights and act on them
- receive criticism from others
- voice their wishes, demands and criticisms
- understand and listen to others

1. Finding security within myself

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, places the need for security before physiological needs. To feel secure is a fundamental psychological need.

In the oldest, most direct interpretation, "protection" refers to a shield from the weather. We call such a place a safe haven. If we are able to find something like a safe haven within ourselves, we will be well-equipped to confront life's challenges. After all, security and adventure are closely linked. If I feel protected and sheltered, I am able to mature, not only internally, but also in ways that manifest themselves in the external world.

In order to develop security, I have to focus on the word itself and define what it means to me. The following questions can help in this process: Where do I feel safe? Are there places, people or situations (real or imagined) that enable me to physically feel the meaning of protection? How does my body register such experiences? What am I lacking that keeps me

from feeling secure? If I lack the ability to feel secure, what do I need to do to make that feeling possible?

As I take steps to create my own sense of security, I'll need to experiment with space and distance. I'll need to become acquainted with the limits in me and the limits in the outside world. By experimenting, I'll learn how to protect myself against attacks from others and from my own inner critic.

2. The development of inner certainty

Are my wishes justified? Am I allowed to have these wishes? Do I take myself seriously? Will people still like me if I go against their wishes? I can find a frame of reference for answering these questions if I concentrate on my physical experiences and learn how to listen to them. Real wishes and needs feel authentic. This makes it easy to take them seriously and protect them from attacks.

3. Identity - Who am I?

Insecure people tend to identify with the weak, helpless parts of themselves. What they need is to connect to the other overlooked parts. Reestablishing relations with the powerful, positive parts of themselves will help them appreciate just how complete they really are.

Questions I could ask my inner self are: is there something else in there besides insecure feelings? How would it feel if I had power? What would I have to do to find my strength?

My self-confidence increases as I treat myself with friendliness and patience. I can sense this physically. How would I have to treat myself in order to feel confident and at ease: would I need to be accepting and supportive or critical and strict?

I can also ask myself: what would be a helpful way to protect myself against the inner critic? The answers will grow out of my unique situation. They will be custom-made for me and more unique than anything I could just think up or manufacture.

As I work with these questions, my identity expands. I am no longer just a weak person. I am also strong and able to bring about change if I want to. Little by little I become competent in interacting with my deepest self. To approach this step behaviorally, it can be helpful to

engage in self-appraisal by listing one's positive character traits and reading them aloud to a friend.

4. Facing fear

Scientific research suggests that fear can be overcome if it is confronted. If I can create a distance between myself and my fear, then I can look at it, confront it or ask myself: what would give me confidence in this or any other situation? What would help me withstand this fear? When I do this I discover that my horrendous fears are exaggerated. Would it really be that bad if I made a single mistake, if someone rejected me or was dissatisfied with me? Would I die? Would the world end? Maybe I'm stronger than I thought. Through this process, my fear is diminished.

5. Finding my place in the world

Confidence means remaining true to myself when I'm confronted with criticism, manipulation and demands or when I express an idea, ask for something I need, or say out loud what's bothering me.

If I direct my attention to my felt sense, my inner position becomes transparent. My wishes become my own and I can feel their legitimacy. Once I've done this I can experiment with other strategies. If I check in with the felt sense, I can tell whether these strategies are compatible with how I want to be.

When our feelings of fear, guilt and sympathy are touched upon, we can be easily manipulated and abandon our wishes and personal rights. In such situations, the felt sense helps us reconnect to our personal interests.

6. Providing room for intuition and fantasy

It serves us well to nourish our inner-child. Here lies the core of our energy, our creativity, our zest for life, our vigor, our cunning and mischievousness. Our inner-child is delighted when we notice it.

To become familiar with the felt sense and tap into our sensory awareness means having consistent access to our inner resources and to a positive, autonomous healing processes.

When we develop from within, we can forget our fear and learn to trust ourselves more deeply.

7. Expanding one's territory

By observing nature we can see that squabbling and wrestling allows young animals to find their place in a hierarchy. It also allows them to test their strength and expand their range of play. Being “good” is boring. All too often we are reminded that the world is not a friendly place. We must learn to assert ourselves and communicate where our boundaries lie. It's fun to be cunning and clever! To conquer is part of our genetic code. Doesn't focusing provide room for these kinds of self-expression? Doesn't it allow for conflicts, fights and fair disputes? It is possible to treat ourselves gently and with respect even as we negotiate with others.

Walking a tightrope

In 1994, Philippe Petite, an expert tightrope walker, performed an extraordinary show during Frankfurt's 1,200th Birthday Celebration: he walked across a rope from St. Paul's Church to the “Kaiserdom”. The day was a windy one and we waited a long time for Petite to begin. He ventured out several times, testing his balance in the face of strong winds, only to turn back and wait for the weather to change. It seemed clear that he was testing the situation and sensing each time that he did not yet feel secure. He had to rely solely on his instincts, as he had no back up; he was working without a net. His senses, born of experience, were the only assessment tools he had.

In absolute subjectivity, in reducing the world around us to our own units of measurement, lies the key to our security. Artists know they have no choice but to let their inner sense guide them. They are led by their confidence and by their ability to let themselves be carried.

For me “weaving a safety net for the soul” means introducing an internal system of protection, support and evaluation which detects weaknesses and repairs them. Further, it serves to catch us when we are weak, insecure or discouraged.

Once we have learned to trust ourselves, we can act freely, putting our strength to the test. And we can do so confidently! It can be so much fun to test the limits of our personality. Focusing offers this possibility to all of us.

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