

COMMUNITY WELLNESS FOCUSING IS CROSSING AND COLLABORATING

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INTRODUCTION

I sit here with my computer open searching inside myself. What do we mean when we talk about Community Wellness and how might we explain what we do? We know that Focusing is a human process and that it naturally crosses with other activities because we have seen it over and over again in so many settings around the world. We start with knowing what Focusing is for us as part of the world-wide Focusing community. Wikipedia notes that:

[Focusing]...involves holding a kind of open, non-judging attention to an internal knowing which is directly experienced but is not yet in words. Focusing can, among other things, be used to become clear on what one feels or wants, to obtain new insights about one's situation, and to stimulate change or healing of the situation.

Focusing is a life-forward process, which we share with our fellow human beings. As humans, we do not live in isolation, but rather in communities and groups. Whether we connect with others through our family, a village, a peer group at school or a wellness group such as a Twelve-step program, we are all interdependent beings. It is within this interactive space between people that conflicts and friction can arise. Community wellness practices recognize this tension, as well as the shared aspects of such elements as trauma (war or disaster) or just the everyday struggle to support our loved ones. These approaches highlight the value and importance for any individual's well-being within the context of a healthy community, and thus the inclusion of Focusing is a critical element in healing on so many levels—from the personal to the interpersonal.

Focusing can be blended or crossed with anything in life. As I come back into myself, I notice first, a memory of the second workshop on Community Wellness that Nina Joy and I held at Stony Point in April, 2010. We handed out note cards and asked everyone to think of all the ways they could cross Focusing with something else in the world. As we worked together to list things, we came to the realization that what we were all thinking about was of "Something" to which Focusing could be added. In other words, instead of finding people who want to learn Focusing and then creating a Focusing group, it was easier to add Focusing to something a group of people were already doing. Based on this we came up with crossings, such as the following:

- Music and Focusing
- NVC and Focusing
- Twelve-Step and Focusing
- Children and Focusing
- Theater and Focusing
- Aging and Focusing
- The Arts and Focusing
- Resiliency and Focusing
- Gender awareness and Focusing
- Women in transition and Focusing
- Development aid and Focusing
- Management and Focusing

At a workshop in Japan (August 2013), participants worked in groups to come up with ideas for “*something* and Focusing”. We gave out two prizes: one for the longest list and the other for the funniest or most unlikely suggestion. One group was only able to come up with five, but another group listed more than fifty. Everyone thought the funniest, least likely idea was to bring Focusing to ministers of the Japanese government. Their lists included tea groups and Focusing, teachers and Focusing, nature walks and Focusing, Buddhism and Focusing and so on.

Invitation 1: And what can you imagine?...Take a moment and settle yourself into your body. Sense into areas of your work, family or life in general that can use Focusing. Bring this into your body and notice what comes freshly for you...maybe take time to write down what comes. Maybe also take a moment to appreciate your body’s capacity for Focusing.

And when you are done, write down what came.

SHARING FOCUSING THROUGH “BITS”

In this process of combining community wellness and Focusing, Nina Joy and I started by thinking about the “bits” (components, parts or elements) of the Focusing process that we might want to share. Because our community wellness work requires presentations that are immediately trainable and sharable at any level by those who learn it, we came to realize that we were not teaching Focusing in an orderly, progressive manner. What we did find, however, is that there were many aspects of Focusing that could be shared without trying to train people to be “experts” at Focusing. An excellent example of such an adaptation

is William Hernandez's use of the Pause to teach Felt Sense Literacy, which demonstrated that any "bit" of Focusing could lead participants into an inner relationship with themselves and into deeper understanding of the group. Thus in using the Pause as a way to approach Focusing, Hernandez met the need of the group in a simple way, one which supported inner transformation as it facilitated community wellness. Nina Joy and I found a similar process in Afghanistan as we worked with Afghans to meet their immediate needs.

How might we discover some of the "bits" of Focusing?

We start by imagining that Focusing is made up of parts or components or "bits" and each "bit" is like a piece of a child's jigsaw puzzle that has been cut into 6-10 pieces. There are so many elements of Focusing that we learn over the years that it might feel difficult at first to even sort out some. To facilitate that process, we developed **Invitations 2** and **3** that deconstruct Focusing into "bits" and then further deconstruct one of these "bits". Over the years Nina Joy and I have found that we could start sharing Focusing from any of these "bits". This process is one that is open to change, and I have found it does not matter what comes first or last on the list.

Invitation 2: Take a moment and settle yourself into your body. Sense into the broad steps or components of Focusing as it comes freshly in your body...Maybe you want to spend a little time here holding what comes to your awareness...Hold whatever comes as a guide for moving forward...And take a moment to hold some gratitude for what has come...

And when you are done, write down what came.

For example, at a Community Wellness Workshop in Japan, one group came up with the following "bits" of skills:

- Clearing a space
- Reflection
- Listening
- Inviting
- Feeling the felt sense

Now, I invite you to take the time to look at your list of "bits" and sense into each one...to see which one seems to call to you...Maybe one feels right to select for the next step...Take a moment here to bring whatever comes freshly in your body, sensing how it feels there. There is no right or wrong in the choice you make, and you can always select another if you like. If it feels right, start by holding this "bit" as a new jigsaw puzzle for which you will want to find the smaller "bits" it contains. What are these? Sometimes I call these "bits" the skills we need to be able to Focus.

Invitation 3: Take a moment to settle yourself back into your body. Invite in this new piece that has become the new puzzle and hold it freshly in your body... Sense what comes for you as *ITS* parts... As before, this is not all there is to this component, but what comes holds some of what feels important about this... And before you stop, thank your body for what came...

And when you are done, write down what came.

The same group selected *Feeling the felt sense* and listed some of its “bits”:

- Waiting
- Noticing something
- Staying with it
- Feeling a shift

In this following section of looking for “bits”, we want to sense into some of the important attitudes about safety that we develop as we learn to Focus, and especially, attitudes of safety, within Focusing partnerships, that help keep our inner places safe. As you work through the next invitations, you may find that you cannot distinguish between skills and attitudes, but that’s ok.

Invitation 4: Take a moment in your body. This time, sense into the key attitudes that are important in Focusing... Maybe taking some time to hold them freshly, sensing what new meanings they might have... Take time to get a body feeling for each one if it feels right, getting a felt sense of one of these attitudes that you came up with... Maybe bringing one or more of these feelings back into the room with you.

And when you are done, write down what came.

The Japanese group listed the following attitudes:

- Welcoming
- Interested
- Presence
- Being gentle

In the workshop we noticed that any of the attitudes could be matched to any of the skills. When crossing Focusing with something we do in life, we might want to start by sharing a skill, and at other times we might want to begin with a Focusing attitude. Each time Nina Joy and I work with a community we start at the beginning, asking them about

their needs, without assuming that we know the answers. We pair what comes freshly about the bits of Focusing with the attitudes we might want to help them develop. Because each situation is different, each list tends to be different. This is the value of sensing into what comes in a new way.

COMMUNITY WORK

Where do you work? What in your life calls for Focusing? Where might one of the “bits” of skills or attitudes that support the Focusing process be helpful?

It is easy to identify what is wrong; yet, no one wants outsiders (or even friends) to see only those parts of life that are not forward moving. One of the things I have learned is that if I want people to really listen to a health message or a message for change, it is better to start by helping people enhance, increase or even recognize what it is they are *doing right*. I spent the last 20 years developing health and mental health programs for refugees and others in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In order to facilitate these programs, I

1. Does the behavior cause harm to the individual/group, or
2. Does the behavior cause no harm or benefit (or is it neutral) to the individual/group, or
3. Does the behavior have benefit for the individual/group (positive).

Then, I would ignore those actions that are neutral and immediately focus on those behaviors that are positive or have benefit. This orientation on the positive brings the community together, and they feel they have something to contribute that is life-affirming and in which they can take pride. It is uplifting and also reassuring to share these observations among themselves and in front of an outsider.

Moreover, the three questions above can be used as a model to help promote wellness. As trust is built and understanding grows, the community will start to identify those areas of harm that they want to change. Then the impetus comes from within and is not dictated from outside. It has been our experience that when we hone in on what is working or healing in a group, in time, as this wellness is strengthened, other issues will be brought up and included in the healing process.

In Afghanistan I was asked to develop programs for prevention of violence against women. Yet, no man wanted to be confronted by an outsider telling him what he should or should not do in the home. Instead, the program started as a wellness program for village women using a bit of Focusing, with attention on listening skills. We found that by starting with inner healing and strengthening the positive, the men saw their wives, mothers and daughters transform and become less violent themselves as they practiced listening skills. The men asked for help to learn these same skills so that they would not use violence in the home. Through applying a “bit” of Focusing and matching was what wanted in the community, we found violence was reduced. Men and women started by listening to their inner selves, those parts of them that felt wounded and angry. And then they practiced listening to each other. Just the simple act of listening brought huge changes in their lives.

To put it simply, we helped the community ask themselves the following:

- What is the issue that the community wants to solve or heal
- What positive skills do they have
 - What skills do they want to add to this
- What positive attitudes do they have
 - What attitudes do they want to develop

In the beginning of our work with Focusing in Afghanistan in 2001, we were requested by an aid organization to develop a program that would help Afghan aid workers who lived as refugees in Pakistan and were working to bring sorely needed medical, food and development aid in war-ravaged, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. The organization made a decision to assist their staff in dealing with the traumas they had all suffered from the war in Afghanistan, including loss of family, property and livelihoods, from the harrowing flight to safety in Pakistan and their struggles to live in Pakistan as refugees.

Participants of our initial workshops identified what their problems, issues and needs were, such as wanting to know specific ways to deal with trauma and violence in their lives. Many asked for ways to stop being angry. As we worked together, with Nina Joy, leading the way with Focusing, we explored some of the skills this group already had in their tool kit, including examples of positive coping and non-violent communication. It was important to start by honoring the positive ways each person dealt with their reactions to trauma and loss so that they could build on these strengths and skills, before adding new skills.

What we found is that they had a great capacity, even in the midst of poverty, to honor guests. This skill is something they took pride in and considered it part of how they defined themselves as Afghans. Their attitude toward guests was that of deep caring, kindness and patience. Regardless of who would come or how long they might stay, to an Afghan, any and all guests were cared for and accepted as important and deserving of attention. The skill of honoring guests and the attitude of patient kindness were the same as those skills needed by a Focuser to be with whatever comes inside. Once we all honored the Afghans' skills, we were able to support any existing skills that were weakened because of the violence in their lives, as well as to offer new skills in a way that would fit the best.

The Afghans chose to develop four skills:

- The ability to process and hold their personal traumas
- The ability to pause and then listen
- The ability to listen to family, friends, neighbors with non-judgmental kindness
- The ability to sleep at night without drugs

We would like to discuss one of the skills that they wanted to practice: learning to pause and listen, without advice or comment or judgment. And this was easy to add to

their already existing skills of caring for guests (which included kind conversation with their guests) with time and practice. As we worked on core skills, we found that we could match their need to listen without advice with an important “bit” that Focusing had to offer: Holding Presence with what comes.

- The attitude of patience
- The attitude of kindness and calmness
- The attitude of gentle listening
- The attitude of compassion

We found that people automatically shared these same methods of supporting positive proficiencies and added new skills as they took what they learned home to their families and communities.

What skills did the Afghans choose to develop?

- The ability to process and contain their personal traumas
- The ability to first pause and then listen
- The ability to listen to family, friends, neighbors with non-judgmental kindness
- The ability to sleep at night without drugs

What attitudes helped the process of healing?

- The attitude of patience
- The attitude of kindness and calmness
- The attitude of gentle listening
- The attitude of compassion

Invitation 5: Now I invite you to bring your awareness into your body again, ground in the felt sense of the moment...Maybe this is a good time to come to gratitude again. Just for a moment, sensing all that comes around that...And when you are ready bring back into your awareness...*all about your community*...Taking time now to hold its needs or wantings or issues...as they come freshly to you in this moment...Sense into what positive skills already exist...What positive attitudes exist right now...Welcome what comes, no matter how small...Wait and check if there is more there...Then, with gratitude for whatever comes, bring your awareness around how it would feel in your body to be with your community or group if these skills and attitudes were reflected in everyday life...take time to hold this. Maybe even asking if there is more here...And be with whatever comes in a Focusing way, with kindness and gratitude.

And when you are done, write down what came.

FINAL STEPS

In the end, it is important to join with the community, holding in a positive way what came, so that this healing process can grow organically. In every setting it is impossible to address all the needs at one time. But it is possible to begin a process that can have far-reaching effects. One question we often ask ourselves is: “If I have only one hour to introduce Focusing and leave people with a skill that will help them, what would I teach?” In fact, any “bit” will help: the Pause, Listening, Being with the Felt Sense, etc.

In Afghanistan:

I want to share an example of meeting a community need using Focusing Skills and Attitudes. Once we knew the Afghan skills/attitudes toward guests, we, together with the Afghans, developed a way to help. We learned that we needed something that would offer people a safe place away from the harsh realities of war and devastation. We were also told that many people in Afghanistan suffer from stress symptoms, including the inability to go to sleep at night or to stay asleep if they do. In fact, according to the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, the abuse of over the counter sleeping pills is a major problem throughout the country. So, we thought that one skill that might help would be the ability to *go inside to a safe place*.

Our Afghan colleagues told us that few knew of such a physical place, as they had all lived with war and violence their whole lives. In Islamic and Sufi traditions, such a place is described as part of the *inner realm* where one comes close to the divine. Great! So we concluded that one of the skills they needed was a way to come into that safe, internal place. And this is one of the skills we learn in Focusing. The corresponding attitudes we wanted to support were those of calmness, kindness and caring. We designed an activity that we called “the Safe Place” (or the Calm Place) where participants would first think of a calm, beautiful place where they would like to be. Then a facilitator would ask the group to close their eyes and lead them through a simple body scan to come into their bodies. We always did this process slowly so that there would be time to feel each part of the body and to sense into what came in their body as they spent time in that place. Next, once they were in the center of their bodies, that space between the throat and the belly, they would be invited to bring this imagined calm place into their body and sit there.

After the group had been in their calm, safe place for about five minutes, they would be invited by the facilitator to bring any feelings that came to them while Focusing back into the room. As people opened their eyes, it was obvious to us who had been Focusing and who had taken a nap. For many people in Afghanistan, this short exercise would have been one of the first times they had a peaceful nap without intrusive thoughts in a long time. Most welcomed the experience and either told us how relaxed they felt or shared that they had indeed slept.

At that point we encouraged them to share what they learned with family members or friends. Many reported that they had someone in their family who would be able to use this

sleep exercise at night. In one group the women joked that they were going to put their doctor out of business since they no longer needed his medicine to sleep.

People caught up in war, disaster or trauma need many of the skills that Focusing provides. Above is just one example. The simple act of coming into the body and then noticing how the body feels when it learns to relax is an example of a skill that can be easily shared. If I had only one hour in Afghanistan to teach one Focusing “bit”, *relaxing* and finding a *safe place* is probably what I would share, because *the safe place* also helps to develop calmness and caring kindness.

It was important to work through this process with each group as their needs can vary. In Afghanistan we found that, although there was the common overriding theme of war and trauma, each community we entered had its own issues that *wanted attention*. Working as a team with those who would benefit from Focusing helps guarantee participation and sustainability.

Invitation 6: Now I invite you to return to the notes you made through the various invitations. Review what you have written as you went through the process.

Now, bring these invitations into your awareness and hold each part, as a gift to be held or something alive to be nurtured...Wait with them, seeing what comes as you hold them together...What newness comes in this space between them? Pay close attention to what the body holds around all of this....

Some way forward may come...Hold that with gratitude as a gift...Appreciate what comes and thank your body for the wisdom it holds for you.

Maybe when you come to the end for now, write or draw whatever came.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

In developing Community Wellness programs that incorporate Focusing, we met the community members at the level of their issues or needs, not ours. As we moved forward in Afghanistan, we found that the niche most open to Community Wellness work was in the field of teacher training and classroom management. In the end we worked with teachers, non-profit organizations, UNICEF and government ministries to include Focusing and psychosocial wellness training for pre-school, primary and secondary school teachers in Afghanistan. Those programs are continuing long after our most recent visit in 2009. By working through an organic process of program development and the crossing Focusing with community needs, we were able to grow programs that made sense at the local level, and which also were fundable by donor agencies.

We did not know where the whole process would lead, but we trusted that it would benefit someone along the way. It never ceased to amaze us when we would meet a teacher in a remote village of Afghanistan who would proudly show us a certificate that she had earned in Community Wellness Focusing. And there were more than a few times that we wondered, at the end of a workshop, if people picked up something useful. Once after a very brief introduction of Focusing to a group of Afghans, one young woman, who clearly attended because her supervisor wanted her there, left, seemingly to me, to have done little more than nap and talk to her friends. I thought she must have felt as though she had wasted her time. Two years later she met Nina Joy and told her that what she learned in that short workshop had saved her life.

Community Wellness work and Focusing seems to be very similar to what happens when you plant a flower garden from seed packets. You can only guess at what the end result will be. Nina Joy and I had no idea what our work would look like when we started but we look back and see so many surprising and delightful areas of growth—green plants and gardens of Focusing and wellness in so many places.

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Nina Joy Lawrence holds an M.S. in Counseling from Oregon State University and is a Certifying Coordinator for The Focusing Institute. She has taught and provided counseling to people of most age levels from preschool through graduate school, and offered adult education in the U.S. and in Pakistan. In 1997 she met Dr. Patricia Omidian while they were both in Pakistan, and in 2001 helped her develop a program including Focusing for Afghan refugees who were running an aid organization for other Afghans. The program combined with other people’s community Focusing work to eventually be named Community Wellness Focusing. Nina Joy continues to support Community Wellness efforts around the world. She can be reached at 9ajoy@comcast.net