

CO-CREATING A NEW RESPONSIVENESS: Healing Trauma Through Focusing Partnership

Minda Novek

Focusing Partnerships are fertile opportunities for growth. For trauma survivors, such Partnerships can provide powerfully transformative ways of being in the world, both internally and externally. Like a pot-bound plant, whose roots take up so much space and energy that the rest of the plant stagnates, a trauma survivor may feel stuck in a space that he/she has long outgrown but cannot escape. Focusing Partnerships help the trauma survivor create a wider, more open space to live in. Partnerships can provide the essential nutrients of acceptance and an environment for Felt Sensing that allow the survivor to grow beyond the limiting confines of the past.

For any Focuser, a Partnership does not replace the beneficial experiences of Focusing alone or with a therapist, but it can complement them, particularly for a trauma survivor. In a peer-to-peer context, Partnerships provide a multitude of benefits: They can offer a quiet, receptive space in which to discover and give expression to an unfolding Felt Sense in the presence of another, letting what is *sitting inside* take form, and be safely felt and heard; when this unfolding happens, the Focusing Partnership is a revelatory, satisfying process. For some, being patiently listened to and accurately heard is, in itself, a unique experience.

A Partner's presence helps remind the Focuser that his/her self is separate from the content of the situation being attended to. A Partnership can provide the chance to *Be With* hard or seemingly unknowable issues without criticism, expectations, or corrections — from oneself or one's Partner. A Partner helps to amplify awareness, as well, around all that is taking place, so that the Focuser can build a new reservoir/resource bank of accessible and sturdy process and a deeper understanding of content. The Partnership can become a safe platform for relational healing from which to experience trust, develop self-confidence during interaction with another, explore new avenues of flexibility, and begin to take further Life Forward steps.

A Focuser stays in touch with a newly forming Felt Sense as it develops from within and brings a *Focusing Attitude* (patient, attentive openness, without expectations or pre-determined goals) to what might unfold. She/he learns to keep company in a bodily-felt way, to find the right closeness or distance in relation to what is going on interiorly at a particular time, and to *Be With* what comes in a non-judgmental, unbiased way so that the Felt Sense can unfold. This is more than simply spending time with something. The process is a compassionate way to *Be With* an issue, a feeling, or the Felt Sense that emerges, and is key to creating the space needed for something alive to grow inside — something truly felt, yet newly formed.

Further examination of issues and benefits for the Focuser in a Partnership, particularly where there has been trauma, includes: **The Presence of Trauma, Communication**

Issues for Focusers with Trauma and their Partners, Beginning a Partnership, *Being With* and the *Focusing Attitude*, Active Partner Participation, The Companioning Partner's Experience, After-Session Conversations as a New Way of Relating, and The Focusing Partnership as a Resource for Relational Healing.

The Presence of Trauma

For a Focuser with trauma, visiting hurt places inside without merging with or exiling what comes is especially challenging. The Companioning Partner can model and reinforce the uncluttered openness of the *Focusing Attitude* and the compassionate support of *Being With*. Through repeated visits into this kind of interaction, a Partner can help a Focuser with trauma to stay compassionately present with himself/herself long enough to experience the Felt Sense of relief and safety in the body, to find accurate language (or other handles) for the bodily feel of what comes, and to steadily hold a condition of receptivity as more unfolds. As the Partner reflects back, the Focuser may notice a greater complexity to the situation being explored. The Felt Sense of an experience can now include the Partner's reflection, the interaction between the two Partners, and a sense of relief, as the Focuser's *state of being* expands beyond the starting point of the session. The Focuser's self feels larger than the issue.

For any Focusing Partnership, there are crucial factors that need to be considered by the Focuser and Companioning Partner. For a trauma survivor, both partners need to take into consideration the impacts of trauma in order to help the Focuser develop beyond those impacts. For an effective interaction to take place, the Partnership must involve some essential commitments, and Focuser and Companion both need to be patiently open to taking risks within the agreed upon boundaries of that relationship.

Revisiting unprocessed traumatic content without sufficient resources might possibly result in a degree of re-traumatizing. One way to reduce the chance of the Focuser merging back into the old content is to Focus on the *bodily feel* of the issue — physical, vocal or imaged expressions of the energy that arrives with that content. Another important component is to provide grounding by stating something concrete about both Focuser and Companioning Partner being together *now*, in the present moment, in the present space. The calm presence of the Companioning Partner encourages further processing, and a feeling of relief as the tight hold inside lessens. Even when content is not shared, an acknowledgement of *something* that cannot yet be voiced is helpful. The trauma survivor's sense of isolation and loneliness with these hard issues and invasive sensations can be eased by the Companioning Partner's "witnessing." The Partner's *Being With* presence may even make it easier to revisit hard places, bringing an added level of safety for experiencing such content.

Communication Issues for Focusers with Trauma and their Partners

The delicate balance in Partnership, particularly during early Focusing interactions, is increased when trauma is present since the Focuser may bring to the Partnership much habitual distrust. For trust to develop, an understanding of the Focuser's communication requirements and preferences needs to develop. The very process of expressing those needs

is an important part of healing for the Focuser. Those with trauma often develop strong defenses for dealing with recurring past dismissals, judgments, scorn, blaming, punishment, shaming, denials of his/her own experience, and redirecting towards fear or guilt. Reactive forms of self-protection and self-blame become ingrained responses to repressive treatment, interfering with healthy interaction in later relationships. At the beginning of a Focusing Partnership, such disruptive feelings can be easily triggered by a Partner as the trauma survivor begins to enter into the precarious territory of self-exploration in another's presence.

By his/her very presence, the Companioning Partner is an advocate for openness in which not everything has to be shared or said aloud. By *Being With* the Focuser during the session, the Companioning Partner enables the Focuser to *Be With* whatever may come, whether it's a flood of words and images, a manageable stream, or even just silence. Content need not be addressed directly; selective expression can still allow for resonating to take place. For example, the Partner can resonate: "So there's a long silence here, and a deep sigh." For some, sounds of assent or brief inter-comments such as, "Yes" are helpful. For others who may be hyper-vigilant, reactive, or otherwise overly attendant to other people's attitudes, even the sound of another's voice or any comment can disrupt a Focuser's tenuous connection to a Felt Sense.

We all have learned patterns of human interaction. Past interactions can be replaced and reinforced by the positive interactions in a Focusing Partnership. However, for some traumatized people, ingrained habits of response to outside negative influences can at first misinterpret *Being With* as *Being Messed With*. For them (or anyone for that matter) who is dealing with trauma and therefore easily reactive to others, any misrepresentations, charged words, even sounds, that don't accurately reflect what was said, can be a cause for problematic interactions.

For example, a Partner's suggestion to enter a bodily-felt awareness can feel like a frustrating distraction, invasion of privacy, or misdirection of attention. The Focuser can feel, "There are hurting places needing my attention and he/she is pointing me elsewhere." Even reflecting back can be experienced as disruptive noise. For a Focuser highly susceptible to triggers, the Partner's comments can feed into that activated bodily state, or past traumatic scenarios. Even brief inter-comments or sounds of acknowledgement such as "mmmm" can be disruptive. If the Partner says something that triggers an activated scenario, the Focuser's reaction may be explored. The Focuser needs to communicate that so that both parties learn techniques for how to get beyond that kind of impasse. Trust can be established through successes, but also through a genuinely shared exploration of failures, and in ways that feel empowering and safe, not confrontational or interruptive. Even when the Focusing Companion reflects back somewhat inaccurately, the reflection can be helpful if the Focuser feels fully empowered to correct the reflection, and can experience the Partner's encouragement of that correcting process. Many, many times growth comes from such correcting of mistakes in reflection as the process of asserting what feels right for the Focuser strengthens and furthers the rightness and opens up a next step.

For the Partnership to work, a Focuser with trauma needs to be able to ask for what's needed, or at least, to express an instance where something is not working, and to take responsibility for finding what will work. Co-creation of the relationship requires both

parties to be committed to a real possibility for growth. A Focuser not yet able to delineate needs can still explore these difficult situations in order to better learn how and when to ask for a specific kind of support. The supportive interaction with one's Partner gradually replaces past disruptive experiences.

The Partnership can be risky as a place where the Focuser with trauma can be triggered in many ways, but it can also be a place where she/he can learn *the feel* of safe Felt Sensing and even begin to repair the broken process of interaction with others. If the Focuser has internalized those old deterrent responses in a self-directed continuation of abusive past interaction, the Companioning Partner's non-judgmental presence can serve as a reminder that the Focuser is entitled to compassion and opportunities of growth.

Where trauma is involved, Focusers and their Partners need to allow much room for trial and error to work out their co-created communication. Something that has been "denied" for the whole span of life may now need some new elements in order to transform various and complex feelings into a qualitatively improved experience, as it unfolds. The process continues within a session, and in an ongoing Partnership, over time, until the Focuser and the Partner both trust the process — and each other! The challenge is to find a safe way into the Focuser's process, a method for jointly making space for something new to be heard, both internally and externally.

A sense of freedom develops for asking for what is needed or expressing difficulty as it comes up; gradually, past experience of disruption can be replaced by the new Focusing Partnership model. Part of this new model depends on the Partner's ability to hold open a new kind of spaciousness for the Focuser. On the Focuser's part, honest expression of confusion, self-doubt, expectation of judgment, and other difficulties shifts from being part of a problem in communication to part of the journey to healing solutions.

For many of us, there is often a feeling of not being able to say to others what is going on inside: perhaps the Felt Sense is too vague, too slow in opening up, too conflicted, too embarrassing, too frightening. There are so many ways any of us can develop a fear of direct expression and a doubt in the validity of our own thoughts — and even more so, for a Focuser contending with trauma — where communication has been severely damaged. Trauma victims have often experienced a sense of never being heard, being cut off prematurely, being punished for expressing feelings, being laughed at, or always being told what to think or feel. Countering those traumatic feelings may require many rounds of repeated experiences where the Focuser feels safe and strong enough to assert boundaries for the Partner. These boundaries can be renegotiated or made more permeable, as trust is established, and as a Partner shows sensitivity to the Focuser's needs.

Partners take turns Focusing. Both parties concentrate on the needs of the one Focusing. A trauma survivor may be chiefly concerned with taking care of others and be uncomfortable considering his/her own needs, especially ones that compete with those of another. Maintaining an inner focus of attention is hard because a person with trauma may find it particularly difficult to be the center of attention, without the customary method of escape through deflecting attention to the other. The Companioning Partner offers the Focuser the opportunity to notice this tendency, to let go of much of their concern about the

other and to bring the caring presence to his/her self for a change. With enough room, he/she can learn to attend to what's going on inside rather than be drawn up in concern for other's state. In addition to this new kind of spaciousness, there is a built-in acknowledgement of the importance of safety and of a somewhat flexible set of boundaries. Setting time limits for the session (or pausing when feelings overtake the process) may help the Focuser tolerate these new forms of attention from the self and the Partner. If the Companioning Partner intercedes in unhelpful ways, the Focuser can learn to articulate preferences since these are expected parts of the Partnership process.

Focusing Partnerships can help to normalize difficult experiences, issues, and feelings. The Companioning Partner *holds a space* open for the Focuser where she/he can safely *Be With* the hard or nebulous things/parts that need attention. The Focuser's own way of articulating such difficult or inchoate content is reflected back in neutral tones. Whether the reflection is in one's own words, or in those of the Partner, hearing it said back aloud creates enough distance to sense how accurately the "thing" was heard. Once the Focuser feels accurately received in this non-judgmental, non-corrective space, there is room for *something new* to come. Of course, communication is not a perfect process. But if both Partners are able to hold that intentional space open, the process of exploration can withstand a certain amount of mistakes, forgetfulness, etc. To some extent, the Felt Sense of being listened to determines what gets heard versus what gets re-activated. The Focusing Companion can help reinforce a sense of importance to the Partnering experience itself as well as to the Focusing process.

The Focusing Partnership structure offers a sense of safety, if the Focuser feels that there is room to set boundaries and to articulate communication issues. Then he/she can experience a new kind of space, an inviting space of partnership which does not demand that any specific results follow. The space assumes that the Focuser can develop a trust and an expectation of reliability by exploring the generous properties of safe communications. Even if the process doesn't lead to a complete shift, the Partnership space enables a sense of fresh experiencing, a workable method for exploration, relaxation, and the hopeful gratitude for what comes when the *internal space* around an issue is *larger* than previously perceived. For some, the act of experiencing gratitude is transformative enough in itself.

Beginning a Partnership

A preliminary conversation may be helpful in setting ground rules for the Partnering interaction to take place. These agreed-upon basics need to be based upon the steps and concepts of Focusing, which allow a new Felt Sense to develop and be attended to. For an experienced Focuser, aware of the ways trauma impacts his/her process, supportive conditions with a Partner can be articulated quickly. For a less experienced Focuser, the Partnership arrangements require some time to adjust to or to articulate further needs. For a Focuser with trauma, the range of needs may shift as the Focuser's level of comfort or reactivity is impacted by a particular issue or impactful event. The Partner needs to know that he or she can always request feedback regarding any specific or altered needs that surface during the unfolding Focusing process.

A Focuser with trauma around communication can request quiet, or reflection, or help with Clearing a Space, or another form of response from the Companion Partner. It is in the freedom of the shared relationship *to ask*, and in the asking, a certain kind of trust begins to be established. Another crucial factor regards how the Focuser experiences the Companioning Partner's attention — that is, does the Focuser feel genuinely listened to and accurately heard? Process-skipping to solutions, advice, or palliative measures, may only disconnect the Focuser from being in better touch with the Felt Sense. As the Focuser asserts his/her needs and experiences the Companioning Partner as providing what was requested, the Focuser can find a growing confidence in his/her own ability to heal and in the Partner's responsiveness.

Being With and the Focusing Attitude

The ability to *Be With*, for most of us, needs to be recognized as possible, acknowledged as worthwhile, and then be repeatedly cultivated and practiced. Often an altogether new learning is needed. The Partner can model the qualities of *Being With* and the *Focusing Attitude* towards what comes up. This process enables the Focuser to learn what the *Focusing Attitude* feels like through example, through need, and often through trial and error. The Focuser continually re-experiences the compassionate acceptance of the *Focusing Attitude*. As this fresh experience of *Being With* is recognized and appreciated, its place in the Focusing session grows more meaningful. *Being With* one's Felt Sense while another person is *Being With* your process of exploration offers an opportunity for a Life Forward movement to take place. The Focuser with trauma is increasingly open to new ways of experiencing, without the frozen reactivity and built-in filters of the past keeping things static.

In a Focusing session, a Focuser's Felt Sense of *Being With* can include what is being *Focused on* and what it's like to *Be With* 'that' at any point. In a Partnership, the Focuser also experiences a Felt Sense of how the Partner is *Being With* his or her process. The Felt Sense of being listened to by a Partner can impact what the Focuser himself/herself "hears." The partner can help the Focuser stay in the present — especially when dealing with feelings like anger and fear — by modeling the *Focusing Attitude*, enabling the Focuser to go inside and hold a steady and safe place *there*. Learning how to *Be With* triggered feelings at a bodily-attuned distance and with an attitude that ensures safety and self-empathy, while *tolerating* uncertainty, requires an ability to dip in and out of content. This dipping allows the Focuser to safely gain a body feel and a larger perspective of "the whole of it," (rather than falling into it) that comes from the Focusing Process itself.

A Partner, continuously holding a *Focusing Attitude*, can offer the Focuser alternative experiences of a new language and new logic to meet newly unfolding needs. There is great relief to be found in creating a safe space together where the unknown, the resisted, the resented, the frightening and the confusing can surface at a safe distance with a language and logic to meet it as needed. For example, a handle can be found for parts that are stubbornly vague or unapproachable. The Partner can acknowledge the validity of that language, even if the vocabulary is preverbal, gestural, or expressed silently. As the Focuser learns

about awareness of the Felt Sense and safe ways of *Being With* it in the presence of a Partner, further change occurs, however gradually and subtly, in his/her way of experiencing.

Active Partner Participation

A Partner's reflections can offer further opportunities for growth. Often, by the conclusion of the session, a new Felt Sense has formed for the Focuser of the whole situation and how it is felt in the body. This *state of being* can be now experienced and accepted with new awareness. This shift can bring a sense of relief and also serve as a new Handle for future exploration.

Each new facet of change adds to the effective complexity of the Focusing process for the Focuser with trauma — the Partner's neutral yet supportive presence, the gradual improvement in communications between the Partners and consequent lessening of guarded behavior, the loosening of hypervigilance in sessions by the Focuser as his/her Partnership Companioning needs are recognized, discussed and successfully met.

The Partner can become a steadfast witness, putting aside judgment, expectations and ownership of the moment to support the Focuser's finding a way to *Be With* what is there. Such witnessing is a brave and valuable act in its own right: supporting another's being present in the moment and *Being With* — safely, and intentionally. When the Partnership relationship works, the Focuser has a real opportunity to stay true to her/his own process, leading to improved interactions with others. Even when a non-Partnership interaction is difficult, there is now a growing Felt Sense of what is missing. Attending to that Felt Sense can encourage new opportunities for greater openness.

The Companioning Partner's Experience

The largely one-sided aspect of this Partnering model is tempered by the fact that the Focuser in turn becomes the Companioning Partner, and in doing so, learns to meet the expressed needs of the fellow Focuser. Sometimes, too, the specific content of the other person's session can resonate with the Partner's own life experience. The Companioning Partner is also learning a wider range of interactional skills, as well as a greater awareness of his/her own issues. For example, the Partner may sometimes recognize an impulse to interject, to soothe, and otherwise interact with the Focuser in ways that interfere with the internal Focusing process. Attending to the Focusing Partner's needs can help the Companion Partner develop a greater consciousness of his/her own process as well, improving his/her ability to *Be With* both within the Partnership and in life in general.

After-Session Conversations as a New Way of Relating

During the Focusing process, the relationship between the Focuser and the Partner adds another level of relating. This level can be explored either during the session, or in an after-session conversation. A good deal of addressing Partnership-related difficulties can be adjusted over time with discussion. Hopefully, Partners will continue to maintain a *Focusing*

Attitude even in a discussion that takes place outside of a session. The trauma survivor can continue to practice a healthy assertiveness and feel Forward Movement in the expression of his/her needs without fear of abandonment, rejection, dismissal or derision due to feeling the Partner is still *Being With* him/her. Partners can also develop between themselves a familiarity with, and at times, a shorthand language for referencing past experiences, family dynamics, conditions at work, and other subjects of attention in the Focuser's life.

The Focusing Partnership as a Resource for Relational Healing

A Partnership provides the Focuser with a unique opportunity to reach an understanding with another person around how to evolve an interactive process that works for her/him. As the trauma survivor experiences healthy interactions in the Partnership, self-confidence grows stronger. A Partnership can help establish, or reinforce, a bodily-felt sense of safe interaction. Even after Partnered sessions, the Focuser may remain in process, recognizing triggers, and bringing self-compassion during moments of stress. In crisis situations that arise for the Focuser, the spaciousness and supportive qualities of a Companion in Partnership may serve as a healing resource. The Felt Sense of this healing resource can help to build resilience and diminish the impact and duration of trauma once triggering has occurred, and even, to some extent, reduce the frequency of occurrence.

Healing for the trauma survivor comes *through* the process rather than at the end of it. The original trauma *interrupted the ability* to process experience and feelings. But what has been fragmented in the past cannot be put back together from only broken parts. A replacement is needed, and that must be created from, and in, the newly formed present. A Focusing Partnership helps the Focuser transition from that sense of brokenness to new inner resilience and to more grounded ways of being with others. The impact will most likely be felt gradually, but with each successive experience of relief co-created with a Partner, a Focuser may explore more expansively, strengthening the ability for conscious connection inside and with others.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank my editor Zena Goldenberg and the editors of this journal for their advice and support during the revisions of this article.

Minda Novek is a Certified Focusing Trainer and a Bio-Spiritual Focusing Teacher. In addition to Focusing alone and with a therapist, she has sixteen years of Partnering experience, including two ongoing long-term Focusing Partnerships. She is also involved in a long-term peer study group that brings the Felt-Sensing process to Eugene Gendlin's A Process Model. She can be reached at mnovek@optimum.net