

LIVING COMMUNITY WELLNESS FOCUSING: How It Can Become Part of Any Program

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with Patti Panzarino and Nasser ben Hassen*

Focusing International and other Community Wellness Focusers are carrying forward an essential part of what Gene Gendlin and Mary Hendricks Gendlin see as the mission of Focusing in the world. We are finding ways to live so that Focusing is welcomed into structures that already exist and spreads by the daily work of other organizations.

How do we live Community Wellness Focusing? What do we do in our everyday lives so this work becomes part of what is happening in our communities? One loyal member of our Community Wellness monthly phone gathering, Mary Elaine Kiener, says, “Each one of us in our own way is creating space for wellbeing.”

Here are three projects in process, all sponsored by Focusing International. Nasser ben Hassen lives and works in Tunis, Tunisia; Patti Panzarino in Massachusetts, U.S.A.; and Patricia Omidian is currently working in Monrovia, Liberia.

NASSER BEN HASSEN’S STORY

For many years of teaching English as a second language, I have always struggled with the first class meeting. “Getting-to-know-you” wasn’t an easy activity for me. A few years ago I started learning Focusing under Dr. Patricia Omidian and began to realize that things could be very different inside the classroom. So the room has become my “House” and the students my “Guests” (borrowing Rumi’s metaphor of the Guest House). Letting the students know they are my guests, with all the connotations of respect, distance, and acceptance, is worth the thousands of words that I used to say to try to clarify the kind of contact / rapport that I hoped I could establish with my students.

My students used to get upset when they dealt with new language systems or skills. Now their whole attitude towards learning new things has changed because I emphasize something that I once heard Gendlin say: *‘Learning is thinking and thinking is what you don’t know’*. There is always something missing which they are in class to *‘touch’*. I usually suggest that they sense — in the centre of their bodies — what *Something* means, in addition to their intellectual understanding. Then some silence comes, deep breaths, smiles, eyes light up as though they are seeing something fresh and amazing. Sometimes I ask them to close their eyes if they wish to and check to see if there is *more...* and there is always something new.

Focusing is deeply rooted in Arab as well as Muslim culture. The Quran says, ‘God will not change the condition of people until they change what is in themselves’ (ar-Rad 11), which is quite similar to what Gendlin (1981) says in *Focusing*: ‘Human problems are by

their very nature such that we are each inherently in charge of ourselves. No authority can resolve our problems or tell us how to live' (p. 6). Also, in surat Ash-Sharh, 'For indeed, with hardship will be ease. Indeed, with hardship will be ease' (5-6). The phrase is said twice to emphasize the role hardship plays in our growth. And Ann Weiser Cornell (2014) wrote in *Treasure Maps to the Soul* (p. 2) 'We found ourselves saying that the most difficult areas of life were treasure maps to the soul'. When I met Ann and Barbara in the Treasure Maps Seminar in Amsterdam in April 2014, they were surprised to learn that what they had discovered in their deep Focusing practice was already written in the Quran.

Knowing how much Focusing fits in their culture, my students feel 'safe', grateful, and comfortable with the process. They share their stories with me, sometimes very private stories, and I listen with curiosity. Being aware of the important role of the individual to carry forward positively, I adopted a 'Guided Discovery' technique in which students could experience language as a learning process using what they feel in their bodies as well as their intellectual mind and rely on themselves, not the teacher / authority. It's really useful that students be in contact and share what used to be invisible in them and take responsibility for their learning.

Change is happening in me as well. I am no longer the boss. I am the curious companion and listener who acknowledges *what's here now*. I offer empathy, respect and positive regard and receive them on the other hand. Now, I am aware of the Part in me that is burning to see me reading and studying as long as possible, and the Part that does not want to do that. I used to be identified with both Parts almost all my life. Now, after a few years of learning Focusing, I am still with my Parts, but no longer overwhelmed. I have become a hard working teacher, and I have taken a number of courses — and have been doing very well. And I'm carrying forward very positively. I'm noticing how my life is changing magically.

Focusing has showed me that students don't come to the classroom only with their books and pens. They also bring with them lots of their feelings, wishes, and experience. If they are given the opportunity to be with what they already have inside of them without judgment or objections, a new society will come up after centuries of 'exile'.

My plan for the future is to spread Focusing among the teachers and teacher trainers in Tunisia. I've suggested that the Ministry of Education adopt my project to build a network of Focusers who could integrate this skill in our schools. I'm waiting for their reply.

EMPOWERING

Nasser brings Focusing to his daily teaching in ways that fit so well culturally that the students are comfortable. Focusing helps empower them to learn a new language. It may become so effective that the Education Ministry considers incorporating Focusing skills in their training.

The next story is from Patti Panzarino, Ms. Wheelchair Massachusetts, 2012, who experienced Focusing many years ago with one of our Community Wellness pioneers and Focusing International Board member, Anna Willman. The experience stuck with Patti and

led her to begin work to become a trainer. She wants to make Focusing available to the community of people dealing with disabilities.

PATTI PANZARINO'S STORY

Sometimes I feel like I am a juggler. Sometimes I feel like the conductor of a huge orchestra, making sure each part is playing on the precise notes it needs to be and as loud or soft as it needs to be. Other times I feel like a fragmented computer with different thoughts and feelings swirling around some personal cyberspace. Most times I feel like the captain of a huge ship, keeping it on course by making sure passengers, crew, and family are all taken care of and happy. And all these feelings come up on a normal day. You see, I am a woman with a disability. I am an employer, not because I manage a corporation, but because I need care 24/7 and recruit and manage my own staff. I wear many hats. I am a wife, manager, advocate, sibling, friend, and daughter of two very elderly parents. In my own quiet space reside many parts. I used to try to keep them quiet or ignore them so I wouldn't have to face many of the feelings and battles that go on inside of me.

Recently I started training to become a Certified Focusing Trainer. I have almost completed level I. I received news that my 91-year-old father had a stroke, followed a few hours later by the news that my 87-year-old mother needed a heart procedure. The timing of these two events could not have been more perfect because the news came during one of my Focusing training sessions. I don't know how I would have handled the week I needed to spend with my parents in New York without Focusing skills.

On a normal vacation, traveling overnight requires more preparation for me than the average person. I reschedule personal care attendants so one can accompany me and pack respiratory and other equipment that is required to make me comfortable and functional. Then I add the normal every day tasks of choosing outfits to bring and fitting everything in a suitcase. All of this compounded the stress and apprehension I had as I faced a week of long days in which everyone (my parents, husband and care persons) depended on me.

I remember being scared during that time to practice Focusing with one of my trainers; I thought I might just break down and cry because of all the stress I was going to have to handle. However, in my quiet inner space there appeared something like a giant bulletin board with many pieces of different colored paper, each representing a feeling or obstacle I would have to endure. My Focusing partner asked me what it would be like to pick up just one of those pieces of paper and give it attention. Naturally I picked an easy one that told me I was safe. This choice allowed me to recognize all of the other parts that would need my attention, at one time or another.

Focusing is a very healthy and useful tool especially during stressful times because, rather than repress parts of myself for fear they would overtake me, in my quiet space I can give them acknowledgment and attention so they do not become like children screaming to be recognized. Taking a pause a few times a day during that week gave me much needed peace. I became 'friends' with all my different parts which made me be a better wife, daughter, personal care aide manager, and advocate for my parents. I am very grateful for Focusing. I'm

looking forward to learning more and more about it — and the different parts that appear in my quiet space — and I want to take it into the community of people with disabilities to help them go forward with multiple feelings and challenges in their everyday lives.

CO-CREATING

You have just seen Patti's expertise at dealing with challenges common to the community of people living with disabilities. She will be much more effective in teaching Focusing in her community than someone who doesn't have her special skill set and knowledge. To meet the needs of her community, we co-create new ways of Focusing training that fit the specific culture. As Patti learns Focusing skills from us, she teaches us many things we need to know, such as how to adapt language so it speaks to her community instead of turning them away. We learn to adapt timing for differing energy levels. We are sensitized about the issues that may come up with the possible presence of caregivers during training.

Focusing International offers community wellness for people living with disabilities. If you are interested, contact us by going to focusinginternational.org/en/contact-us. We will have on-going Community Wellness Focusing training groups for this population. If you want to contact Patti, she invites you to email her at mswheelchairmass12@comcast.net with any interests or questions. She is willing to share how Focusing has changed her life and how Focusing has helped her with the daily challenges she faces as a person living with a disability.

This next section is the moment-by-moment unfolding of Dr. Patricia Omidian practicing her profession of medical anthropology. You will be able to see how she brings Focusing into a work plan that did not originally include Focusing. This story is pieced together from emails, Skype conversations, and Facebook reports during Pat's contract with the World Health Organization (WHO).

PATRICIA OMIDIAN'S STORY

July 28, 2014 Announcement on Focusing International website

Dr. Pat Omidian, medical anthropologist and Co-Founder of Focusing International, is one of several experts being sent to Liberia to work as part of the WHO team combating the epidemic there. As a medical anthropologist, Pat's job will be to gather information on local practices, particularly those that hinder the spread of Ebola. She will also look for ways that traditional practices may help spread the disease.

Pat is also tasked with assessing psychosocial issues in the communities affected by epidemic that could help medical personnel respond to the outbreak. She will be generating a series of recommendations to improve communication, outreach, and responses to this deadly outbreak that kills 61% of its victims.

July 28 Skype call, on arrival in Monrovia

I met the psychologist from International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and we want to coordinate, both of us really interested in resiliency and positive deviance, looking for the healthy practices that are already present locally. I'm hoping I can work with her and the social mobilizers and do some resiliency work.

July 29 email to Community Wellness list

Hi everyone, I need to Focus, and I need a partner. Most of mine are currently asleep, or already into their day. (Ruth from Israel got in touch quickly).

July 29 email after Focusing...

Just being with the [inner] guest that wants to be with people in a kind way helped me the most. I think I was feeling like I could not be warm and be myself. I just cannot touch people. And this is a country of people who like to touch and be in physical contact.

July 30 Facebook report

Someone told me today that "Ebola is a disease that can only be stopped by not being kind. We are told to not touch our sick loved ones. How can we not comfort someone we love?" But to touch someone who is ill with Ebola can be the death sentence for the caregiver. That's why there are so many deaths and illnesses among health care staff. I am meeting many brave people.

August 3 email

I start my interviews tomorrow but will go and meet with a Christian church today to get permission to run some focus groups, a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. I am working with two young people, free since the university is closed for a month because of Ebola.

August 5 email

Community surveys are working well, but I have not figured out how to include Focusing in them.

Aug10 Facebook

Hey everyone, I am just starting my 3rd week here in Liberia. The people have been wonderful. I enjoy local staff at the office, internationals working with us, and other groups we meet in the communities. This is an amazing place where Christians and Muslims are working together to solve problems. I hope it can remain this way. Meanwhile, Ebola is

spreading rapidly. People are starting to be more cautious. The problem is that one can KNOW what to do but that does not mean that one will DO it.

August 18 email

It looks like there is a good chance that I am coming home as planned and then after two weeks coming back here to do psychosocial wellness stuff. Right now I have a report to give. I sent a note to the WHO head (WR) and he liked it and told me to send it forward. I did and next thing I know I am listening to someone tell me about a meeting where their working points exactly matched what I had written.

August 18 Facebook

The key is to listen...Finishing up my last week. Will leave on the 25th but have a ton of work between now and then. And I learn over and over again how important it is just to listen to people, to hear their fears and be with them. It's about being human with them.

August 21 Facebook

I cannot believe that I leave Liberia in just 4 more days. I am pleased that the presentation at the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare was well received. This country has a long way to go before Ebola will be stopped.

August 22 email

How many UN offices does it take to get an anthropologist out of a country in West Africa? At least three country offices, and one regional office. And, as all of this is going on, they are working to get me back into this country, too. If I had energy I would just keep on working through another month, but a break and some different clothing would be nice.

August 24 Facebook

The Ebola outbreak is a crisis beyond belief. There seems to be very little international will other than "containment" but in truth, the world needs to help or thousands more will die. This is worse than war!

August 26 email

So the news is...I had a ticket finally from Monrovia to Ghana. Turns out they did not pay to hold my ticket and so it disappeared. So now I have a ticket to the US, but not out of Monrovia. Stuck. I feel exhausted. I did not expect to be so down by the news, but I really did want a break. No ticket to come back to the US. So I am getting another four-week contract and will do work on psychosocial wellness here in Ebola-stricken Liberia.

August 30 email

Bad news about the Ebola — into Senegal now and predicted to hit 20,000 cases before it's under control. The numbers are finally realistic. Some of us were saying that their estimates were crazy, but it's clear now that Ebola is going to rival the 1918 Influenza pandemic. It's still a disease spread by touch, not airborne, so that is a blessing.

September 2 Facebook

Started the new work on psychosocial and community involvement. The world needs to pay attention. This outbreak will only grow and engulf more countries.

September 2, 5:00 AM Skype chat

I hope to do some Focusing but the days are so very long. It is so odd because it can feel very good here — and then reality hits. Example: a body lying on the street with people walking around the person (dead or still alive). I have not learned the art of managing these realities. It is harder than dealing with beggars in Pakistan. How to show humanity and not be infected...or endanger others?

My colleagues and I start psychosocial support training next week. I will be teaching some basic Focusing to social workers and mental health workers. Because this is also a training of trainers, we hope that this group will continue the work of training others.

September 3 email

I can insert Focusing into what I do but not teach it by itself. Yet it is exactly what is needed. Next week we do a PFA (Psychosocial First Aid) that is so much like our Afghanistan trainings. I think I will start with the "Pause". If I use just Pause and Listening I have the basics of Focusing.

Trying community mobilization and it's working. People like being listened to. Some estimates of how many people could be affected show numbers over 10,000 by end of this month and could go as high as 200,000. We actually have no idea about the actual numbers right now. There are bodies left in the streets, on the beaches, in homes that are not even counted.

September 5 email

Story of an empowered community! One of the doctors in an Ebola treatment center wrote the following to our internal WHO list. (The sprayer is the person in the treatment center who sprays anything contaminated by Ebola with strong chlorine and water mixture).

MESSAGE FROM THE DOCTOR

“As for the treatment center, I am glad to report that 18 patients are negative for Ebola as of results obtained on 4th September 2014 and of these, 16 are true cures from EVD (Ebola Viral Disease)!!! This includes one mother of a two-year old baby boy who has managed to stay healthy throughout his mothers’ illness. I wonder if he was not already immune to the Ebola. His father died of Ebola before the mother fell ill. This little boy used to mimic the sprayers with the drinking-water plastic sachets, which he would use to spray the health team! And he would also shout “Sprayer” every time any of the team members called for a sprayer!

God is good all the time! Let the success stories begin!”

Warm regards,

September 5 2nd email

I think that with supportive care the death rate would drop to under 30%. Most people die of the consequences of severe dehydration. The death rate is high because we cannot get everyone into care.

September 6 Skype audio call

It’s almost a miracle how much difference Focusing makes. One of my psychology friends said, “I saw you were almost in tears as somebody told their story and I thought, ‘oh, oh, you are going to need help’.” But you know, I don’t want to not-feel. And the woman who told her story let me know afterwards that she so appreciated that I really heard her.

It’s so sweet; the people here bought new linen for the hotel and all the used linen they are going to donate to the Ebola treatment centers. That’s really community wellness, people helping each other.

We found the positive deviant!! We found a woman who figured out on her own how to care for Ebola patients; she has helped other people care for their loved ones and not get Ebola. She uses locally available materials to avoid infection; a long sleeve shirt, plastic bags, soap, water and fire. An infection control person found that it’s been done before in other outbreaks. But we can’t scale up until we get approval from home office. We have some doctors that are absolutely adamant that Ebola has to be treated in a specialized hospital or at least a holding center, where infected people can go until there is a place in a hospital for them. This method avoids infecting the whole household. At the last meeting somebody said, “You know, the whole city is a holding center! We’ve got to quit pretending!”

There is no disease that isn’t affected by community processes. Every disease is. We community people have been saying that, and finally some of the doctors are agreeing.

INVITATION TO YOU

Reading Pat's experiences as they unfolded, we have just been with her, sensing her way forward using Focusing along with all her other training. She finds community allies, and begins building a program that includes Focusing, always collaborating with the other workers and community people.

Each of us is creating a space for wellbeing in our own way. We pause and wait, beginning to identify what is needed and how to create it together. We would love these stories to encourage you to look around you and sense if there is some community in your life where Focusing would fit.

None of us has to work alone. We can reach out to each other and grow something together. On a recent monthly Community Wellness phone meeting Ruth Hirsh noticed our calls are examples of living the process of community wellness. We can show up just the way we are, with whatever we are holding and get the caring support we need for our work and ourselves.

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Focusing International is dedicated to supporting social change through community and psychosocial wellness as a way of helping people empower themselves by blending Focusing practice with local culture. We support people in difficult, unjust, or overwhelming situations to work together to develop and spread resiliency. We have seen how human beings thrive when they are emotionally safe, and free to shape their communities in healing ways that hold significance for them. Our systematic approach is grounded in the philosophy and therapeutic experience of Focusing and in an appreciation for the strength and resiliency embodied in local culture and traditions. For more information: www.focusinginternational.org.

REFERENCES

Gendlin, E.T. (1981). *Focusing*. New York: Bantam Books.