

## BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF OUR SKIN: Extending Our Felt Sense

---

*Annamarie Early, Ph.D., LMFT*

---

Current neuroscience supports what the Focusing community has always known. The inner realms of the implicit are the prime movers in change — they are essential for forward movement. Eugene Gendlin (1996) was decades ahead of his time, pointing clinicians inward to the felt sense and offering ways to attend — with great respect and curiosity — to what is forming in the here and now. As a psychotherapist and professor of counseling, I have come to value Gendlin's work with clients, in teaching and training, and in my own life. Focusing practitioners have learned to trust the power of the implicit, and they allow emergence to come in the most creative ways. The Focusing community has been a teacher for me.

In this article, I offer support from neuroscience for the importance of accessing the implicit by highlighting the crucial role of the right brain hemisphere. From this understanding, I will introduce the roles of attunement, resonance, and regulation and describe how these capacities influence our ability to attend inwardly and to stay present with others. This explanation will be followed by an introduction to experiencing subtle energy pathways, which offers new potentials for extending the felt sense beyond the boundaries of the skin through *attunement to* and *resonance with* energy and flow in order to increase regulation and to enhance our capacity to be present to others in our work.

### THE ROLE OF THE RIGHT HEMISPHERE

The realm of the implicit is described in the literature in a number of different ways. It is generally referred to as 'intuition' and has been called procedural knowledge (Ecker, Ticic, & Hulley, 2012), bottom-up processing (Fosha et.al, 2009), embodied awareness (Fogel, 2009), limbic attunement (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2007), right hemisphere processing (McGilchrist, 2009), and nonconscious, nonverbal right brain processing (Schore, 2008). I like to refer to it as the *intuitive implicit*, acknowledging the importance of the implicit as distinct from what is explicit, and valuing the intuitive aspects of knowing that emerge in inspired ways when attending inwardly.

McGilchrist (2009) describes this space as the realm of the right hemisphere. The role of the right hemisphere is to scan our surroundings broadly through the non-verbal channels of our immediately experienced inner knowing. The Focusing community will recognize this description as the realm of the felt sense. The right hemisphere is distinct from the left hemisphere, which is languaged, re-presentational, ordered, categorized, and narrow. Both hemispheres are important and help us to 'know' in different ways. They are distinct, and each has well-defined roles.

McGilchrist (2009) argues that since the historical period of the Enlightenment in western culture, the left hemisphere has taken over the rightful role of the right hemisphere. As a consequence, we have lost access to the wise knowing of the emergent right hemisphere. One of the problems is that the right hemisphere lacks words — it is born of unformed sensations — and is not as neatly ordered as the left. Ideally, the right hemisphere scans and comes to know in unformed ways, many facets of knowledge which are then translated by the left — placing words and order on what has been sensed — with an appreciative return to the right brain for continued, open scanning in an ongoing, developing dialogue. McGilchrist mentions geniuses whose most inspired thoughts come about in this right-brain/left-brain exchange.

He argues that in modern western culture the left hemisphere has co-opted the role of the right and is unwilling to relinquish control. The result is the re-presentation of what is already formed and known, creating a self-generating feedback loop that reinforces greater constriction and narrowing. The long-term consequence, he claims, is not just with the immediate information being engaged, but also with our neurocircuitry. *What we are doing and how we are living is literally re-shaping our brains.*

The picture painted above is a bleak one, filled with lifeless rules and repetitive box checking, impacting all areas of lived experience, including how we work in therapy. If the story were to end here, it would be depressing. The good news is that there are fresh winds blowing — interest is increasing around the realm of the right hemisphere. Much of this research is inspired by findings from neuroscience and new research about our embodied selves in the world (Fogel, 2009). Treatments that value embodied awareness, wordless knowing, and emergent, experiential practices are increasing (Fogel, 2009; Fosha, Siegel, & Solomon, 2009; Siegel, 2013a), and not just in psychotherapy. We are in the midst of a paradigm shift that offers support for working intentionally with felt sensing realms in all areas of our lived experience (especially clinically), and that opens up the potential of extending our felt sense *beyond our skin* into subtle energies that influence our wellbeing, allowing us to enhance our connection with others and the larger world.

## **WITHIN: ATTUNEMENT, RESONANCE, AND REGULATION**

An important first step toward these potentials is to name the qualities of the inner realms that, when activated, impact our functioning. Three particular capacities are essential for effectively working with the implicit realm of the right hemisphere: the ability to attune, to resonate with, and to regulate. Each one impacts our *awareness* of the felt sense and is *informed by* the felt sense.

### **Attunement:**

Attunement is the ability to attend to and ‘sync with’ our own inner states and those of others. Accessible and responsive caretakers do this naturally when they perceive something off — or not right — between them and their child. They then work to re-attune — make contact — often through nonverbal channels. The cycle is one of rupture and repair, a natural

unfolding rhythm, like a dance, that forms the building blocks upon which secure attachment is built (Siegel, 2013a; Tronick, 2009). Attunement requires the ability to feel both inside and between ourselves and others, picking up nuances and wordless senses of rightness. We know through minute perceptions and shifts — and emergent nonverbal cues — what is right and what is not a fit.

The ability to attune is crucial for working with the implicit. For some of us, well-developed attunement skills come naturally. For others, work is needed to learn to tune in to subtle, nonverbal cues that bubble up from within. Employing a felt sensing practice can help to increase attunement and have the consequent benefit of increasing regulation. Other possible resources to enhance attunement capacities include: identifying our capacity for *social awareness* and *social facility* as described by Daniel Goleman (2006) (<http://www.danielgoleman.info/topics/social-intelligence/>); increasing nonverbal face reading skills as outlined by Paul Eckman ([www.paulekman.com/product-category/face-training/](http://www.paulekman.com/product-category/face-training/)); and identifying our emotional styles that can each be worked with to alter set points and to change neurocircuitry as suggested by affective neuroscientist Richard Davidson (2012) in his book, *The Emotional Life of your Brain*. Simply being aware that the inner realms are important is a starting place for increasing attunement ability.

### **Resonance:**

Where the ability to attune helps us to form new potentials, the ability to *attune within* establishes a space for resonance. Resonance is the phenomenon in which two vibrating sources match frequencies so that amplitude increases and new potentials are released (Siegel, 2013b). One way to appreciate resonance is to hear how a melody is affected by harmony. When, for example, music is mis-attuned it sounds and feels *off*; it is actually uncomfortable and can be experienced as painful. When, however, singers are attuned to the subtle nuances of each other's voices, the harmony syncs in a way that allows something much more than the sum of the parts to be activated through resonance. This is the magic of the 'something more' in therapy. We seek attunement within, and with each other, to allow resonant potentials to emerge.

### **Regulation:**

We now know that the capacity to regulate inner states is essential to our wellbeing and mental health (Schore & Schore, 2008). What many practitioners often do not realize is that the inner state of a person communicates many different things. When we are dysregulated within, we impact those around us, especially those with whom we work. The ability to regulate our inner state involves awareness and attention to what is showing up inside, and then working to calm (regulate) an elevated state when activated.

Attachment theory is helpful in delineating different regulatory patterns that are established during childhood based on our connections with primary caregivers. These patterns include secure and insecure forms of attachment, in which we either effectively regulate (have a safe haven and secure base), become anxious and preoccupied, or shut

down (become dismissive or avoidant) in response to caregivers not ‘being there’ (Schore & Schore, 2008, Siegel, 2013a, Tronick, 2009). These patterns form from *accessibility to and responsiveness from* caregivers and are open for revision across the lifespan (Siegel, 2013a). They shape our internalized state regulation and influence our ongoing capacity to regulate within ourselves and with others.

Stephen Porges’s (2009) model describes the optimal regulatory space as the ‘window of tolerance.’ He delineates the necessity of having enough activation to be on-line but not so much that a person is in the red zone of fight, flight, and freeze. In the ‘window of tolerance,’ a person can use the social engagement system both to make contact with others and to aid in regulation. Because we are wired for relationship, we use others to help us to regulate. In clinical contexts this is referred to as the ‘dyadic regulation of affect.’

When we activate the space of attunement and resonance, regulatory capacities are increased and internalized in ways that change who we are in the world. The practices we engage — such as Focusing, meditation, and mindfulness — begin to influence our regulatory patterns, enhancing overall wellbeing and increasing resonant potentials (Davidson, 2012; Ecker et.al, 2012; Fosha, Siegel, & Solomon, 2009).

## BEYOND

The roles of attunement, resonance, and regulation do not end at the boundary of our skin. Science is helping us to understand how our brains allow us to extend ourselves and become aware of our inherent interconnectedness. Dan Siegel (2013b) has referred to this connection as a movement from ‘me to we.’ This shift in thinking and perceiving involves a consideration of *self as surroundings* not just *self in surroundings*, where we influence and are influenced by a vast web of interconnections. Features of nature as diverse as quantum entanglement (when subatomic particles are in sync and changes in one impact the other) and epigenetics (where environmental factors such as diet, social environment, and trauma impact gene expression and are heritable) support our consideration of the unseen world and demonstrate the reality of undreamed of possibilities. Bilocation and intercellular communication trafficking faster than the speed of light is not in the imagination of science fiction, but established research (Lipton, 2008; Sheldrake, 2012).

It is an interesting question to ask Focusing practitioners — those who have known for decades the importance of the right hemisphere and the power of the felt sense — how they might expand their practice to incorporate these new scientific realities. I will suggest a few possibilities from my own experience and study, but I realize that we are at the beginning of a new frontier.

### Beyond the Seen:

Stem cell biologist Bruce Lipton (2008) states that “...all organisms including humans, communicate and read their environment by evaluating energy fields” (p.90). Various traditions use subtle energy systems in their interventions and treatments. Many wisdom and

pre-modern healing traditions trusted the communications that came from right hemisphere knowing. They valued and used subtle energy systems within and around the human body.

Over the past year, I have spent over 350 face-to-face hours learning a modality called *Integrative Energy Medicine* (Poulin, 2014). My interest was personal, professional, and pedagogical. I have been a psychotherapist, a professor, and a trainer for many years. I wanted to learn a modality that placed me back into a ‘not knowing’ state outside of my field, one where I had to perceive in new ways and test my sensibilities about the intuitive implicit. I also wanted to learn how to access the intuitive in ways that are active in my personal life, but not integrated in my professional work.

IEM uses subtle energy pathways within and surrounding the body to increase balance and flow in all systems, allowing the body to increase capacities for healing. IEM conceptualizes a 3-4 foot energy system around the human body with 4 distinct layers that can be attended to and worked with. Although a full description of the practice of IEM is beyond the scope of this paper (see [WhiteWinds.com](http://WhiteWinds.com)), it uses similar capacities, such as felt sensing to attune, resonate, and regulate with what one might not literally see (though many energy practitioners report seeing energy visually), but rather, can be tangibly *sensed* and effectively worked with (Poulin, 2014).

Gendlin (1996) states that, “Focusing is a systematic, knowing way to let something implicit open” (p. 53). I want to suggest that extending our felt sensing awareness to include subtle energies allows something implicit to open in new and different ways that can inform our personal practice and enhance our work with others. At this point I can only make suggestions and point to possible ways to extend felt sensing into the beyond, but I believe that this is the next edge for working with the powerful potentials of the implicit and the intuitive. The basic skills that I have found helpful (suggestions only) are a starting place that may help the Focusing community to take some risks in further developing an awareness of subtle energy systems.

### **Exercises for Sensing Subtle Energy:**

A first step is to increase awareness of subtle energy. To sense into subtle energy, one has to make space and tune into what may not seem at first vibrantly alive. This may include reading about various energy systems such as chakras or meridians; engaging in practices like yoga, acupuncture, energy psychology/medicine or any modality that works with energy pathways; or felt sensing through subtle awareness with nature such as Feng Shui. Finding ways to begin to feel into the existence of these energies is a starting point.

Another way to begin to expand awareness is through sense experiments, in which you use the sensitivity of your hands to feel into energy that surrounds the body. You can do this by placing the palms of your hands a few inches apart and sensing the tension and release when the hands almost make contact but do not actually touch. A dyad exercise that can be helpful is to have another person walk towards you and sense what it feels like when they get closer. Notice your inner felt sense of the space surrounding your body. Place your hand up to stop the person walking when you sense their presence. Have them take one step

toward you, sense again, and then have them take one step back. As you pay attention to your inner felt sense, extend out to the space around the body and sense into how what is outside impacts your felt sense within.

Another exercise is to stand with a partner and intentionally extend your energy out into their field and then bring it back into your bubble by drawing an imaginary circle around you. (You do this through intention, as will be explained in more detail in the following section). Have one person do this at a time and then switch. Talk together about what you are noticing as the exercise unfolds, working to notice contact and space (Poulin, 2014).

With each exercise and practice, take note of your attunement to sensations, felt senses, and the extended awareness of your body sensations, and of what is communicated from the space beyond. Just beginning to play with the space surrounding the body will increase awareness and the ability to simply attune.

### **Subtle Attunement:**

A second step involves attunement and receptivity to subtle energy. In my training, I was taught to activate a readied state for receptivity through centering. We were taught to enter what was called our *sacred circle*, which is the energy bubble that surrounds our human body. The process is to imagine drawing a circle around the self on the ground — as if with a piece of chalk — in an intentional act of calling one’s energy back in to their circle (Poulin, 2014). I have used this exercise in my training of clinicians, having them listen before doing the process, and then listening again afterwards. In various contexts, people feel more centered and able to be present when they are within their own energy sphere, heightening their listening and attunement. There may be other reasons for increased listening capacity, including enhanced regulation, but the benefit of this exercise is nonetheless an increase in attunement and resonance.

Another practice developed by Poulin (2014), is referred to as Kenosis from the Greek word for ‘emptied’ and is helpful as a preparation for sensing into the beyond. The process is to empty the mind of thoughts and make space for implicit communication. People close their eyes and allow one word to surface, such as ‘anger’ or ‘shame’. The word is accepted and felt without any internal chatter or dismissing. The word sits in mindful awareness and is followed by, “Thank you, what else?” Only one word is allowed to surface at a time. It is attended to, accepted, and appreciated through saying, “Thank you.” When words drop away, a space is readied for attuning through Focusing, mindfulness, or working to resonate with others. I have found this a quick way to sense inwardly and ready myself to receive, especially when I am attending to the space beyond.

### **Whole System Sensing:**

Recently, a significant life event allowed me to practice extending my felt sense into the beyond. This event, at first, felt like a punch to the gut, taking my breath away. It took me the first 24 hours to adjust as I intentionally worked to regulate, stay centered in my sacred circle, and actively keep my mind from the “now what?” questions pressing in. Once my

body had adjusted, I began to felt-sense my way forward. I used Kenosis, my felt sensing practice of attending and attuning, and then began to include my sense perception of flow and balance in and around me.

Upon awakening the third morning, I felt alert to the anxiety just below the surface and my mind began to race. I chose in that moment to felt-sense inwardly and to intentionally extend my sensing out, practicing my newly learned skills for attending to subtle energy paired with some protocols for restoring balance and flow where there are blockages. As I engaged this emergent conversation, I could feel literal places of stuckness within and around me, and as balance was restored, I began to feel a greater connection to myself and also to the sacred. My presencing became more alive and alert, allowing me to scan more openly and broadly, and to open myself up into the fullness of the experience (which included pain). Slowly my body released and began to flow.

From this place, I began to experience sensations of moving energy — which come in particular ways for me — and from that I was able to sense an alive edge. The only way I can describe my edge-sensing in that moment was that the implicit and explicit met within me and then encountered another edge in the space surrounding me. I might go so far as to say that this edge extended out to my connection with what I call spirit. I could feel the movement pair itself with words as my right hemisphere became languaged by the left, and I could see — or better yet feel, like breadcrumbs along the path — my next step forward.

The situation will take months and possibly years to fully unfold, but that moment of encounter and sensing with my whole system opened a path forward to address what had happened *to me*. It also gave me a new way of sensing myself and what I most truly want. Extending my felt sense beyond my body increased my internal regulation — restoring balance and flow as well as inner calm — and from that moment of attunement came forth the resonance for new potentials.

## CREATING MOMENTS OF MEETING

Extending our awareness beyond the boundaries of our skin opens potentials not only for increased awareness of subtle energy pathways, but an enhancement in our ability to attune and resonate with others. As I have learned to felt-sense more holistically, I have become better able to attune more “fully” or “openly” (I’m not even sure what the words are yet), to those with whom I work. My capacity to tolerate not-knowing has increased (regulation), as has my expectation for the possibility of radical shifts when I stay attuned within and around. The greater my capacity to feel deeply within, and sense the space around my body, the greater are my regulatory abilities and attunement with others.

Dan Stern (2004) referred to the alive, intersubjective space of attuned resonance as *moments of meeting*, in which chronos time drops away, and we enter the timeless space of kairos, where something alive is allowed in our midst. I have referred to this space as *edge sensing*, where the edge within (implicit and explicit) makes contact in the dyadic space of encounter between people (Glanzer & Early, 2012). I now believe that this edge extends to the space that surrounds the body. These contact moments are the edge — the place of meeting

— in both seen and unseen ways. The Focusing community has practitioners who specialize in listening into the *alive edge*. I believe that this emergent realm opens new potentials that will enhance our intuitive, implicit awareness in all areas of experience.

One exercise for exploration of the edge where unseen energy communicates makes use of dyadic attunement. This unseen energy can be explored in many ways, but one practice is to sit and Focus with a partner going in and out of attunement. Have the person *Focusing* close their eyes, while the one *listening* stays present and attuned with intentional focus on the person felt-sensing — holding space or presencing. At some point, the *listener* will intentionally shift out of here-and-now presencing — beginning to think about something else, looking away, or moving into their head — and the person *felt-sensing* can check their sense perception of whether they know when and whether they are being attuned to or not. What is being felt-for is the aliveness of attunement and the perceptible absence when the *listener* is not attuned, and how the *focuser* senses that. This exercise will help affirm what you know, help you practice becoming more attuned to others, and it might just help you open up to the possibilities of the subtle energies that communicate in powerful ways — though often out of awareness.

## RETURN

I do not believe any of what I have written is new; it is actually a reclaiming of an ancient practice and an affirmation of Gendlin's pioneering work. I do believe, however, that the more these concepts can be connected to current science, the more persuasive they will become to a wider audience who may be just waking up to the realm of the implicit. The more we can describe the underlying phenomena active in right-hemisphere-processing, pointing to both theory and practice, the more creative and translatable our interventions will become. And, the more we understand about ourselves as whole system beings — within, between, and beyond — the further we will place ourselves on the edge of science, the edge of transformation, and the edge of what is yet to come.

As we embody the subtle level of our experience with an eye toward what is seen and what is yet unseen, we affirm the 'not knowing' space of the emergent here and now. In this process, we become the living, felt sense of aliveness, feeling our way forward into undreamed of new realms and a myriad of potential pathways forward.

## REFERENCES

- Davidson, R. J. (2012). *The emotional life of your brain*. New York, NY: Hudson Street Press.
- Ecker, B., Ticic, R., & Hulley, L. (2012). *Unlocking the emotional brain: Eliminating symptoms at their roots using memory reconsolidation*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fogel, A. (2009). *Body sense: The science and practice of embodied self-awareness*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

- Fosha, D., Siegel, D.J., & Solomon, M.F. (2009). Introduction. In D. Fosha, D. J. Siegel, & M. F. Solomon, (Eds.), *The healing power of emotion: Affective neuroscience, development, and clinical practice*. New York: Norton and Co.
- Gendlin, E. (1996). *Focusing-oriented psychotherapy: A manual of the experiential method*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Glanzer, D., & Early, A. (2012). The role of edge-sensing in experiential psychotherapy. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 66, 391-406.
- Goleman, D. (2006). *Social intelligence: The revolutionary new science of human relationships*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Lewis, T., Amini, F., & Lannon, R. (2007). *A general theory of love*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Lipton, B. H. (2008). *The biology of belief*. New York, NY: Hay House.
- McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The master and his emissary: The divided brain and the making of the modern world*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
- Porges, S. W. (2009). Reciprocal influences between body and brain in the perception and expression of affect: A polyvagal therapy. In D. Fosha, D.J. Siegel, & M.F. Solomon (Eds.), *The healing power of emotion: Affective neuroscience, development, and clinical practice* (pp. 27-54). New York, NY: Norton and Co.
- Poulin, F. (2014). *The art and science of integrative energy medicine: The professional year one certification training program manual*. Atlanta, GA: WhiteWinds.
- Schore, J., & Schore, A. (2008). Modern attachment theory: The central role of affect regulation in development and treatment. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 36, 9-20, doi:10.1007/s10615-007-0111-7.
- Sheldrake, R. (2012). *Science set free: 10 paths to new discovery*. New York, NY: Deepak Chopra Books.
- Siegel, D. (2013a). Mindsight: Transforming a sense of self in the world. In C.E. Early, & A.L. Early, A. (Eds.), *Integrating a new science of love and a spirituality of peace: Becoming human again* (pp. 12-27). Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.
- Siegel, D. (2013b). From me to we: Embracing membership in the larger whole. In C.E. Early, & A.L. Early (Eds.), *Integrating the new science of love and a spirituality of peace: Becoming human again* (pp. 28-41). Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.
- Stern, D. N. (2004). *The present moment in psychotherapy and everyday life*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co.
- Tronick, E. Z. (2009). Multilevel meaning making and dyadic expansion of experiencing theory: The emotional and polymorphic polysemic flow of meaning. In D. Fosha, D. J. Siegel, & M. F. Solomon (Eds.), *The healing power of emotion: Affective neuroscience, development, and clinical practice* (pp. 86-111). New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co.

**Acknowledgments:** I offer my heartfelt appreciation to Herb Schroeder for reviewing and editing my manuscript and for the oversight and review by Bala Jaison and Paula Nowick. The process was a beautiful demonstration of the ethos of the Focusing spirit, and I offer my gratitude and sincere appreciation.

---

**Annmarie Early, Ph.D., LMFT** is a professor in the Master of Arts in Counseling program at Eastern Mennonite University. Her clinical and research interests include work with implicit processes and the use of experiential, embodied treatment approaches to facilitate healing. She is certified as an *Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy Trainer and Supervisor* and has extensive experience applying attachment theory to clinical practice. She is certified in *Integrative Energy Medicine* — a modality that works with subtle energy systems — and she is currently exploring native healing practices and the intuitive implicit. Contact: [aearly@me.com](mailto:aearly@me.com) Phone: (540) 432-4213.