

## FOCUSING WITH THE STRESSES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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*Salvador Moreno-López, Ph.D.*

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Focusing is more than a technique or a procedure. Focusing implies, among other things, a life philosophy, some attitudes, and a way of being aware. In this paper I explore how Focusing can play an important role in generating care for oneself and for others, and *Buen Vivir* (Good Living) in everyday situations related to stress and eating.

### STRESS IN DAILY LIFE

Quite often, people speak about stress as a problem in daily life. This includes feeling overwhelmed, tense, tired, worried, anxious, moody and irritable, and having difficulty concentrating at work or generating creative ideas, as well as becoming easily frustrated. Stress can also include symptoms of body aches, hypertension, gastritis, insomnia and headaches. We often feel that we can do little to change the causes of stress, which may include day-to-day situations like heavy traffic, bad working conditions, low pay, insecurity on the street and at home, and conflicts with others. And we therefore feel powerless to reduce stress and its negative consequences.

At this point, Focusing offers an alternative way of looking at our everyday situations that can restore our sense of power.

Interaction comes first, says Gendlin (1996). We are beings interacting with others, in specific circumstances, every moment. We affect and are affected simultaneously. He also proposes that a person interacts in each situation according to how s/he feels bodily in that situation. So we can surmise that if we change our body-feeling, our way of experiencing a situation, then we will also be able to change our ways of interaction.

If I'm driving in heavy traffic and I'm thinking, "What a terrible situation, how long will it take to get to my destination, I'm going to be late, it's hot and what an uncomfortable feeling, I have to be very careful to avoid colliding with the other cars," etc., chances are I will feel anxious, angry, irritable and very tired at the end of the day.

I can then invite myself to PAUSE and pay attention to my sensations and feelings. To look beyond my thoughts and feelings to identify and recognize what I feel in my body. Where do I feel it? How is it? I do not explain or try to change it. I make a large space so those sensations can have room to be in the body and be recognized.

I can now sense the body differently. There are also changes of mood and feelings. I can express sounds, words, or gestures that arise from these identified sensations. When I do that, I discover that the experiencing is carried forward. I realize I am starting to feel calmer, less tense, and more relaxed; I stop thinking and just see and hear what is on the way.

My way of driving a car changes. The process becomes more fluid and in harmony with the possibilities available for operating a car in these stressful conditions. I stop fighting with others and being defensive. I no longer feel exhausted, helplessly along the route. When I arrive at my destination, I am in a good mood to address whatever I have to do.

Victor Frankl (1978) noted that the values of attitude are suitable in situations where we can do very little to change them. He reminds us that we can always decide in what attitude we live a situation. Focusing shows us specific ways to live these attitudes: to accept what is there, without judging and to show hospitality to our felt-senses. With these attitudes we can generate good alternatives for *Buen Vivir* in difficult situations.

‘Good Living’, *Buen Vivir*, points to an ethic of enough for the whole community and not just for the individual. It is a holistic and integrated view of the human being, immersed in the great earthly community, which includes besides humans, air, water, soil, mountains, trees and animals. It is to be in deep communion with the Pachamama (Earth), with the energies of the Universe and God. (Boff, 2009) See Boff’s paper in the References to learn more.

While we must always seek to build adequate conditions for *Buen Vivir* and change those conditions that are unjust, oppressive or destructive, we must also address the transformation of ourselves to live better every day.

A different situation arises when I find myself repeatedly thinking about particular issues and problems to solve. The disgust I had with a co-worker, the difficulty of the issues to be resolved, the pressure to do more and finish quickly, the fact that money is not enough to cover expenses, the demands of some relatives who ask for help...these thoughts and more come to generate fear and intense concern within me. Suddenly, I find myself trapped in a vicious circle. The situations, thoughts, feelings and behaviors are fed back, causing discomfort, pain and suffering.

Again, I PAUSE to pay attention from my bodily felt sense, and this helps me to find better alternatives for living.

I give myself a few minutes to attend to what overwhelms me. I can do so as I sit somewhere quietly or walk through a park. I look at all of the issues and concerns. I make a list so that none of the issues is left out — and then able to protest at not being recognized! Here they are, all of the issues, in front of me. How does *all that* feel in my body? I wonder...And I wait for sensations and feelings to arrive. I identify that I feel anxious, worried, scared, angry, tired, unsure, and I recognize these sensations as feelings. I look at them from a distance and try to see if they need my help immediately or if they can wait. If the feelings do not need my help immediately, I move to identify the felt senses related to them and pay attention. Sometimes, I may have to attend to the feelings first.

I am still surprised by how the felt senses change when I pay attention to them, and am reminded about how important it is for me to listen and to care for myself within my body. I recognize that for some cultures, this way of paying attention seems like a weird action. It is understood as doing nothing, a waste of time, being lazy, when the social demand seems

to be “do, do, do and produce” and “work tirelessly because time is money.” When these requirements appear, I pay attention. I wonder...Where does the need to be *doing* all the time come from? Where does the prohibition to pause and to take some time to care for myself this way come from?

It is important to recognize this social ideology that aims to guide my life in other directions and values. These insights also help me to understand some of the behaviors and attitudes of those who come to learn Focusing. These people feel in conflict with the dominant ideas and values of the cultures in which they live.

Once I attend to and express my felt-senses, a wide, dynamic, complex, and clearer panorama about how I am living these situations unfolds. And even better, a process from which I begin to glimpse new and better alternatives for *Buen Vivir* is generated.

Focusing shows Body Wisdom (Gendlin, 1996; Moreno, 2009) to be a process and a way to draw on life’s experiences and learnings to guide interactions in the present. However, some of those experiences were not properly processed. They remained partly or completely frozen. This means that the memory of an experience is not clear or distinct, but is confused with other experiences. When this confusion occurs, those improperly processed experiences interfere with an appreciation of the actual present situation and therefore tend to encourage inappropriate responses.

An example: A few years ago I realized that I got too easily angry in my interactions with a colleague. Something seemed out of place about my responses, and I decided to pay attention to how *all that* felt in my body.

Some sensations came. From these sensations first, an image appears of my colleague. At this point, it is as if I am looking at a printed picture. Suddenly it seems that another picture comes from behind the first one and moves toward the left side — and now there is another picture: my mother.

I was surprised, and at the same time I noticed that something was changing in my body. I felt a relief. I noticed that when I interacted with my colleague, I saw her with images that were of my mother, but inadvertently mixed in with my perception of my colleague. When I made the differentiation of images, my interaction with my colleague was better. It became smoother and friendlier.

This experience was another confirmation to me that the stress that I feel in a situation depends not only on the circumstances, but also on how I live that interaction. And it showed me that if I can change how I feel, I can change what I do, what I say, and what I think. Focusing is a way to change my experiencing and my living daily interactions.

## **STRESS AROUND EATING**

Another aspect of daily life that Focusing can help improve is eating. What do I eat? When and how much do I eat? These are questions that can also be answered by attending to the various felt-senses of *all about eating*...Paying attention to the body when I eat has been a source of discovery and learning. I identify, for example, three areas of my body to which

I pay attention in relation to eating: mouth, throat and stomach. When I think I am hungry, I observe how each one feels. Usually, I find different sensations that sometimes seem to be in tune with each other and sometimes not. I can feel like eating in the throat, but not in the mouth or the stomach. Or feel hungry in the mouth, but not in the other parts. When I notice these discrepancies, I attend with more care and time to my body in order to discover and understand what is happening and what I really want.

I remember Eva, a 35-year-old overweight woman. She had been struggling to lose some weight with a dietitian's advice. One of her main difficulties was limiting what she ate. Suddenly she would feel like eating and then eat an entire package of crackers or half a loaf of sliced bread. Afterwards, she felt guilty and disappointed in herself.

Eva learned to PAUSE and look at her body. She knew about paying attention to her mouth, throat and stomach. So one day, walking to the cookies, she suddenly stopped and said: "I'll stand. How do I feel now?"...Then she found that her feelings were not exactly starving; therefore, she did not need to eat. She realized that she felt anxious and scared. She thought, "This feeling needs my attention in another way." Then she took a few extra minutes to recognize more clearly what she felt and what she needed in order to satisfy her actual need properly.

When I start eating, I can ask myself, "Am I hungry? Do I feel hungry or do I eat because it is the appointed time?" Sometimes I find I am not really hungry, but I eat because it is "lunch time." Then when I am eating, Focusing and Mindfulness invite me to pay attention to my sensations and feelings, to notice the texture, flavor, consistency and smell of food. Thus, I realize what I like and what I do not like.

Until recently, I was a fan of desserts. I ate any dessert and in large quantities. Then I became overweight, but it did not matter enough to change my habit. It seemed so delicious to eat all those desserts! When I started to pay attention, I discovered that I really did not like all desserts, and that sometimes I preferred one specific cake and other times I wanted a different one. So I began to change. I always begin with the question, "Do I really want this dessert?" It is now a question to be answered from my body awareness. And then I have to verify whether or not I like that dessert enough to eat it or whether I will leave it.

Another important aspect is to recognize when to stop eating. I learned from an early age to eat everything that was on my plate. I had to finish it; that was the watchword in my family. I did not ask myself whether I was hungry, I simply saw the plate. And if later another dish came, my attitude was, "Go for it!" By eating more slowly and attending to my stomach, I was able to be aware of when I was satisfied, even though there was still food on my plate. I discovered that this new awareness avoided all of the problems and pains resulting from overeating. I could look to my own felt sense to feel when to stop eating.

More than anything, I discovered that I can ask myself about eating, and from my *bodyorganism* guide and decide what I like, when, and how much. Of course, I find it helpful to learn about nutrition and a balanced diet. I am interested in research findings and the opinions of others about food and eating (Arnaiz & Comelles, 2007).

However, I try to go beyond customs and feeding practices. I think that the most important referent in interacting with food is my experiencing. In this way, I can also give myself the opportunity to experience new foods to find out whether I like them or not, instead of relying only on the recommendations of other people or with other partial information that I have before trying them.

Finally, a word about what we eat. Years ago I stopped eating red meat, pasta, and flour in general. After a month, I realized I had specific hungers. That is, I wanted to eat a tomato or a cucumber, or some other particular food. I remembered a research project reported by Rogers (1969). He cites an experiment in which children were allowed to choose their food within several possibilities for some weeks. It was noted that children ate a balanced diet over time. If one day they omitted some important food, two or three days later they chose that food. A few days ago, after presenting my book about Focusing, a person told me that she was guided by her body to choose her food. Her family thought she might be malnourished. But medical and nutritional checks have found no deficiencies. Hearing what I said on Body Wisdom was meaningful to her. She thought that maybe her Body Wisdom could guide her on the right path about what to eat. She felt more relaxed and confident in her process.

Currently, it seems wise to also attend to the fact that some substances that we ingest, such as canned or industrialized food, may have some negative influences on our health. These awarenesses come from our Body Wisdom which can guide us in choosing the optimal quality and quantity of our meals.

Attending to experiencing, taking into account our felt senses, and guiding our interactions with food from conscious body awareness are Focusing contributions to eating in a healthy and nutritious manner. Through this inner guidance, we promote our health.

## CONCLUSION

Focusing in daily life has become a means of promoting *Buen Vivir* and has helped me to recognize myself as being an author, agent and actor of my living (Zubiri, 1986/1998). The circumstances of life are complex and often difficult. Paying attention to my *bodyorganism* and trusting the process of experiencing, I can guide my living by paths that take care of me, others, and the environment. Without ignoring the need to take action to transform our surroundings and life circumstances, and to care for nature and human beings, we may at the same time receive guidance in our daily interactions through our Body Wisdom.

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**Salvador Moreno-Lopez, Ph.D.** is a Mexican psychologist. He has been orienting his professional practice with Focusing since the 1980's. He works as a consultant, psychotherapist, group facilitator and university professor. Salvador has written the book, *Descubriendo mi Sabiduría Corporal. Focusing*, and several articles related to Focusing. Website: [www.focusingmexico.mx](http://www.focusingmexico.mx) Email: [smorenol@focusingmexico.mx](mailto:smorenol@focusingmexico.mx) Cell phone: +52-33-3157-7866

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