

FOCUSING AND CHRONIC PAIN

Elena Frezza

“Every bad feeling is potential energy toward a more right way of being if you give it space to move toward its rightness.”

— Eugene T. Gendlin

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to share my personal experience with how Focusing can lead to dramatic change in how we relate to pain or any chronic symptom. Focusing is a powerful process for being in contact with our body in a gentle and specific way. It shows us how to listen to the wisdom held within pain and chronic symptoms so they may guide us into healing. By making space inside to *be with* pain and listen to all its facets, accepting them as they are, Focusing shows us how to experientially discover pain’s implicit felt meaning. Through examples of Focusing on chronic pain, we see how *being with* our pain opens up its deeper meaning, helping us to move forward in our lives in a way that was not possible before. As Eugene Gendlin writes, “Our body knows the direction of healing and life. If you take the time to listen to it through Focusing, it will give you the steps in the right direction” (Gendlin 1978).

FOCUSING AND CHRONIC PAIN

One night, as I was going up the stairs of my pretty, luxurious house in New Jersey, I decided not to speak anymore. “What’s the point?” I thought. “What for?” Speaking had no purpose. Talking changed nothing. Everything was the same. I did not feel heard. Something in me had become sad, dimmed, and was furious at each failed attempt to change things. I reached my bedroom feeling that something had broken inside me. I lay down on my same old bed, feeling that same old angst... the loneliness, the inner solitude, which I had also known all my life. Something had changed, however. I was not going to speak about these things anymore, nor about my soul, my dreams, my desires, or about how I wanted love to manifest between us, in our family — so many things about which I would no longer speak.

I woke up to the sound of the alarm clock. Upon getting up from the bed and placing my foot on the floor, tearing pain shot up my leg and nailed itself to my gluteus like a sharp, fine-pointed knife from a merciless executioner. This was the beginning of a voyage my body would undertake in search for the Lost Self of Elena — misplaced somewhere in some shortcut or detour, in the journey of her life.

In one unexpected instant EVERYTHING had changed forever. The flow of my life had stopped. I was no longer myself. I became MY PAIN, for myself and for others. Greetings were no longer “Hi Elena. How are you?” but “Hello. How is that pain in your back?”

The woman who was always available, with so much energy for life, who took the kids to school with joy, who was agile and active, who sang and danced to Broadway musicals, the model from Fifth Avenue, the one full of plans — she was now just a longed-for dream.

This tormenting pain led to a seemingly never-ending series of doctor's examinations, medical treatments, and all kinds of body-based therapies such as Yoga, meditation, the Alexander Technique, etc. All of these futile attempts to ease my pain only made me feel worse, for I felt even more guilty, inept, and impotent due to the fact that nothing stopped the pain. Not even surgery helped. I was left feeling that death was the only thing that could free me from my torment, and my family from having to tolerate my suffering.

The fact is that I did not know how to listen to the pain, listen to its heartbeat, its yearnings, its story — its wisdom, and language.

Today, 24 years have passed since that first day of pain. My grandchildren are the age my children were at that time, five and two years old. I can play with them, run, sing, dance, look for them in the kindergarten — and make them fly!

What caused this dramatic change was Focusing, a naturally occurring process discovered by Eugene Gendlin (Gendlin, 1978). Focusing is a powerful process for making contact with our body as a source of information, and listening to the answers it provides. By learning Focusing I could listen to my pain, listen to its story, its wisdom. The pain itself became my teacher and guide into healing. Listening, in a Focusing way, to 'all that' which the pain wished to reveal showed me the road back 'home' to the woman I had been. Focusing saved my life.

One of the functions of pain is to give warning that something is not right in the body: warning that maybe some damage has occurred; warning of sickness or of a wound. Pain offers us the possibility of gaining information, and serves as useful data for corresponding diagnosis and treatment. Yet, tragically, most of us do not know how to listen to our pain when it starts to whisper to us so that its warning may be heard.

In my experience pain also begins the moment in which some part of our essence is being strangled — in the unequivocal instant when our *whole self* is broken, and something inside us needs to die in order for us to remain alive. Often, when this happens, there is no love, no acceptance, no unconditional support, or listening to the pain, no listening to the screams and suffering of the soul — no faith in the healing process — so the pain remains alone and unheard, its scream becoming louder, as the strangling of our essence continues.

Focusing helps us understand and accompany the complexity and lack of clarity that comes with pain and chronic symptoms. We discover the particular meaning of each pain as it experientially reveals to us its implicit meaning. "Your body knows the direction of healing and life. If you take the time to listen to it through Focusing, it will give you the steps in the right direction." (Gendlin, 1978, p.76)

Focusing teaches us *how* to remain on that edge, that physically sensed edge of the experience, so that we may access the intricate complexity within each symptom/pain.

Gendlin names that which comes from staying with the whole of a problem, issue, situation, or, in this case, pain or a physical symptom, the '*felt sense*'. A '*felt sense*' is the

“holistic, unclear sense of the whole thing” (p.55). By waiting for the quality of that *felt sense* to come into focus, waiting for its ‘crux’, and by symbolizing this vague, unclear feeling with a word, phrase, image, or gesture, the body experiences a *shift* in how it is holding it all. One gets a sense of ‘*this is right*’ about ‘*all that*’. Eugene Gendlin writes: “...of its own accord, the feeling changes” (p.57).

Focusing teaches us how to find or invite a *felt sense* to form about pain. This body sensation has meaning and holds a knowing that has not yet been expressed in words. It is sometimes fuzzy, yet concretely and physically felt. By being with it, something opens up inside. The pain is able to speak to us, and our essence can find its flow again — its wholeness.

For therapists, counselors, and healing practitioners, Focusing offers the possibility of developing a type of listening that uses each individual person as its guide, and the pain or symptom they suffer, thereby adding an essential element to traditional pain treatment concepts. Focusing teaches us how to ‘keep company’ with this inner felt sense and find its subjective, personal, felt meaning, by honoring each individual’s experience — and *experiencing*.

By learning to listen to our pain’s inner wisdom, we are able to choose from within the methods or therapeutic strategies that best meet our particular needs, based on our specific experience.

Focusing thus frees us from predetermined concepts, diagnoses that box us in, and psychological beliefs which categorize and label — all of which usually leave us full of guilt, internal pressures that invalidate us, and expectations that something or someone outside of us knows more about the pain and the symptom than we ourselves know. It allows us to make a space inside to be with and listen to all the many facets of the pain, like that part of us that carries the guilt, or feels invalidated and hopeless, or the part of us that feels like a victim or victimizer.

As Ann Weiser Cornell writes in her book, *The Radical Acceptance of Everything* (2005), accepting all these parts as they are brings a new possibility of trust, a feeling of greater wholeness to the Focusing process. Cornell writes, “We are holders of the open space that includes whatever wants to come (...) We know that there are no enemies in the inner world. We enable the focuser to form a positive relationship with what comes, a relationship of listening and acceptance or, if that isn’t possible, a relationship with the part that finds it hard to accept what’s there” (p. 37).

What follows is a brief summary of a Focusing process in which I was able to hold an accepting relationship with the chronic pain in my sciatic nerve.

Elena: I am in my waist. I’m sensing something tight there... I would like to stay with it for a while to see if it releases a bit, at least long enough to let it know that I know it is there.

Listener: You are sensing there is something tight in your waist.

E: Yes.

L: And you need to stay there.

E: Yes. It was good to hear that back... that something which is tight felt heard, recognized.

The use of the term “something” helps the person dis-identify from the symptom and also invites all that is implicit to express itself.

L: Would it be OK to stay with it, giving it all the space it needs?

E: It is like... mmm.... something tight... no, this is not exactly the right word. It is something being crushed.

L: It is more like something being crushed.

E: Mmm... no, it's not that either... it feels pulled, like squeezed... pulled, as if something is binding it to my waist, it passes through the right gluteus, by the sciatica to my thigh. (With her hands, Elena demonstrates the pulling and crushing.)

L: It passed through the gluteus, through the sciatica... it is like squeezed, but also pulled.

E: Like when you thread something and then pull the thread, the way it bunches up.

L: Ahhh, I understand you now: like when you pull the thread of a stitching, and the cloth bunches up.

Notice how, by staying with the felt sense, and looking for the “handle”, the description becomes more accurate. The meaning begins to be symbolized with images, gestures, sometimes sounds (e.g., “Grrrrrr”).

E: There is tension, but it's different. Everything is changing.

L: Maybe see if you can stay there with “all that” which is changing.

E: Yes, there was tension, but what is screaming now is in the thigh, in the sciatic nerve; it feels very “stabbing”.

L: There is something stabbing there.

E: It is as if it were the needle, as if the needle of the stitched hem remained there. Of course! It's as if someone had forgotten the needle of the hem in my thigh!!

L: As if someone forgot the needle in your thigh.

E: It's amusing, as if the needle is looking at me and is asking me, “Why am I here? What am I doing here? I want to get out of here.” The little threading hole of the needle looks like a little face.

L: The threading hole looks like a little face.

E: She's there: upright, rigid, like a needle, and she can't move.

L: So that's how she feels, upright, rigid. She can't move.

E: Because if she moves, it pinches. Hurts.

L: Ahhh...

E: Can you say that back to me again? "If she moves..."

L: If she moves, it pinches and hurts.

When this part feels heard and legitimized, it begins to symbolize itself as a needle. It acquires its own life, begins to express its vital energy, and to tell us about its existence, its particular quality as a needle, which we can only access through it, by relating to it as it is.

E: I sense there is something very important here...

L: You are sensing something very important there. Maybe it has something to say to you.

E: She feels desperate... this is not her place to be.

L: Maybe notice how the needle feels about not being able to leave this place.

E: Oh!!! It is asking for help!

L: It is asking for help.

E: Its little head is asking me, "What do I do to get out of here?"

L: "What do I do to get out of here?" This is what its little head is asking you. May be you can check to see what the needle needs.

E: What it needs is to disappear... It is as if...

L: It needs to disappear...

E: Yes, as if by magic, because it should not move; otherwise, it hurts.

L: It needs to disappear by magic so that it doesn't hurt if it moves.

In this "staying with" step we are facilitating the available implicit material to express itself, which brings forth more information. In addition, please notice the importance of empathizing with the needle, which is desperate, as if asking for help. It can't move because it will hurt. It has to disappear.

In this example, we are approaching a crucial point in Focusing — a point that leads the Focuser toward a specific body certainty or inwardly sensed knowing: there is something there that is very important. It has to do with the life-energy, and at the same time is not yet clear. It is definitely experienced by the fact that there is some felt sense of core importance

here. The needle knows, and by keeping company with both the sense (of the needle) and the resonance of the listener, the Focuser's experience is carried forward... to next steps.

- E:** *(Pause)* I'm sensing that the needle is withdrawing... as if it's shrinking in on itself within me...
- L:** Notice if it is OK just to be with this.
- E:** Something about this is very strong. As if I am touching something, but I don't know what that something is...
- L:** You might take some time to sense in your body that something you are touching, not knowing what it is.
- E:** *(Long silence.)* Something is vibrating in my chest...but it is not clear yet.
- L:** Can you say hello to that something that is not yet clear vibrating in your chest?
- E:** *(Silence.)* It's a part of me that I know... a forgotten part... **this** is the shrunken part!!!

(Elena cries for a while)

- L:** *(Keeps quiet company.)*
- E:** *(Still in tears)* I can feel its longing, its wanting to belong out here, to be more present in my life.
- L:** Would it be all right to be with this part of you for a while, this part that is longing to be more present in your life?

At this point in the process, some meaning is revealed: this forgotten part is saying "Here I am". In this example, we can see the importance of keeping company with that which is not clear, that which cannot yet be explicated into words. This is the experience of being at the edge of something that is emerging, which is crucial to the process of Focusing. By being with what is there, what needed to be said through a pain symptom is revealed.

- E:** *(Long Pause)* Wow!!! I can slowly feel its energy...its alive jumping quality... it brings joy... excitement.
- L:** Can you welcome all that is coming?
- E:** Something is opening up. My chest now feels more spacious, more alive, as if something were dancing inside me. I feel happy, as if my body has a smile of thanks inside. The needle is no longer there. There is no more pain. Nothing pinches. I sense a path opening up, a very vital new path.
- L:** There is a path opening up... a very vital new path...
- E:** I would like to stay in this place a bit longer and slowly say goodbye to this experience.

- L: Maybe take a moment here to thank your body for all that it has brought forth today... and perhaps to take some time to say goodbye to this inner experience, before returning here and opening your eyes.

Ending the session by receiving what has come is an essential step. It is important to notice the 'felt shift', the change inside, notice this place internally, in order to return to it later; and thank our body, which is always present and available as a source of information, transformation, direction, and unfolding.

As we have seen through this example of Focusing on Chronic Pain, *being with* our pain opens up its deeper meaning, thereby helping us to begin moving forward in our lives ... in a way that was not possible before.

As listeners, we learn from Focusing that it is important to be centered in the experience of each person — and with a deep respect for the organic wisdom that comes from within so that our interventions, suggestions, our *keeping company*, and our felt reflections, can all resonate with that unique experience in its specificity, from a space of empathy.

It is common to dismiss and discount pain with comments such as:

- “This is not chronic fatigue. It is pure narcissism.”
- “This pain must be bringing you some secondary benefit.”
- “Look what you are doing to yourself! This is a hysterical manifestation.”
- “Come on, now, you must make the decision to stop being the victim.”

Though these statements may reflect certain ‘theories’, none of these interventions help in any way; on the contrary, they label the symptoms, stop the healing process, and are of such radical and destructive violence that they plunge the individual into an irreversible process of hopelessness and guilt.

People who suffer from chronic pain are often accused by others of exaggerating or “making up” the pain, especially when the medical tests show no evidence for its cause, or indications of why the symptom should repeat itself. Sufferers often express feelings such as, “I feel so alone and lonely! No one believes me!”

This difficulty in finding the original cause is a painful experience. In addition to suffering for long periods of time, and undergoing many treatments without positive results, the client often experiences the suggestion that the symptoms may be psychological in origin. The implication is that the sufferer is not even a “normal” person. I have often heard comments similar to this one: “I would prefer to have cancer so that people would believe me; or a serious accident, or something that can be seen”.

In my personal experience with “keeping company” with individuals that suffer this “punishment”, “torture”, “flagellation”, or “cross” of not finding the physical cause for their pain, I have noticed that it is easier for some people to undergo all sorts of treatments than to “pay attention inside”. These many treatments may include acupuncture, medication, corrective exercises, using belts or orthopedic neck braces, and even changing one’s mattress! Yes,

many even prefer to undergo surgical interventions, rather than listen to the body, keeping it company, staying there with it, feeling ones self as “the body”, and asking lovingly, “*What needs to be heard?* You, my dear body, who has to carry all the weight of my pain and has to support everything that is so difficult for me, what do you wish to say to me?”

My first step in understanding my own back pain was reading a book by John Sarno, MD, titled “Mind Over Back Pain” (Sarno, 1964). Dr. Sarno’s book was extremely helpful and relevant to understanding my physical symptoms, and this knowing was a doorway to Focusing for me.

Sarno views symptoms of pain as distractions from threatening and terrifying emotions. In other words, pain prevents these emotions from being expressed. He considers pain to be a strategy designed to maintain our attention centered on the symptom or physical pain, thus preventing us from contacting dangerous feelings, for fear they will escape and become conscious in an intolerable manner.

Sarno’s theory connects directly with the internal rage generated primarily during childhood, with the anger or pressure that arises from having to meet internal parental demands in addition to the demands of our daily lives. According to Sarno, some important and powerful questions that invite us to think psychologically, not physically, when the symptoms or pain are present include: “What is happening in my life today?”

The following expresses one person’s fear of paying attention inside:

“I know myself from the eyes of others, and I hate myself,” Fabiana says, while crying, sitting on an orthopedic chair after her second spinal surgery, immersed in deep pain and horrifying fear. She seems even more terrified of feeling internally what is really happening inside. “I know there is something in me. I know it is there and that I should feel it, but it terrifies me. I cannot suffer any more. I prefer this pain.”

She remembers when her father, who often spoke to her through images, told her she was like an immaculate white dress, of the most precious and beautiful cloth and lace, but that it had a red stain on it. “And all my life, my father focused on the red stain.”

After the Focusing session, Fabiana opened her tear-filled eyes, and said: “I want to know myself, from my own eyes, and believe myself; I want to discover how I am and learn to love myself as I am. I am not a white dress with a stain; the stain and the dress belong to my father, they are not mine. I want to find Fabiana, looking at myself from inside like we did today, with my own gaze, and find myself.”

This testimony allows us to see the degree of fear, the terror, the “more-than-horrifying” fear that one person was experiencing, and which prevented her from exploring herself internally. A part of her knows there is *something there* and assumes that finding it will be so intolerable that she will be driven to madness and disintegration. The sense of

fragility and defenselessness is so overwhelming that it becomes a question of bare survival for the person to not go inside. To her, the suggestion to keep this pain company by going inside her body deeply seems to be an invitation to hurt even more. This is a very difficult belief to transcend until the possibility of working with Focusing comes along.

I invited Fabiana to close her eyes, feel her breathing, and slowly bring her awareness into her body, taking time to notice the feelings that were starting to form. I suggested that she simply *hold the space* and find the words to describe the tense or painful places. I repeated her words back to her, so she could feel that I was close to what she was experiencing, inviting her to just ‘say hello’ to the feelings, without any intention of changing them. Focusing is unique in that it teaches us specific ways to *sit beside* our issues, rather than *identifying* with them. Working in this gentle, and empathic way allowed Fabiana to develop trust, in both the process and herself. She felt that she had an inner permission to ‘sit with’ her pain.

With the safe and caring attitude of Focusing, Fabiana was able, to fully experience the part that *knew*, “There is *something* in me... there’s *more* here...” — and — by maintaining a space of safety and non-judgment, she was also able to be with the part of her that was terrified to feel that ‘something’.

Focusing showed me *how* to access and listen deeply to what was inside, to find my inner space, the *felt sense* of it all.

The testimony of Inés Berezra, a client with chronic pain, shows us how Focusing and the knowledge of Dr. Sarno’s work changed her relationship with her pain and helped welcome her healing.

It was not the first time I felt pain in my back. In fact, I had learned to live with that pain for the last 12 years (I am now 55 years old).

This summer, however, the pain was more intense. I tried to not hear it, as I had done for so many years. I had gotten used to living with it. This year, though, I carried a lot of things inside me, and had lots of internal and external pressures. I was also busy with all the arrangements and preparations for my daughter Laura’s wedding.

Returning from vacation and already with a discomfort in my back, I tried to keep up with my daily rhythm. A new, sharp, intolerable pain, however, forced me to go to a medical center just to make sure everything was all right. They gave me a shot of a strong relaxant, and I thought I could continue as before with all my daily insanity.

A few days after I entered the hospital, the doctors said that the only solution was to operate. I had a herniated disc, pinching the vertebra. My husband, “Buby”, called my therapist, Elena Frezza. The first return call I received while still interned helped me to know that she was concerned about me. This alone helped me feel a bit better. She suggested I read Dr. Sarno’s book while still in the hospital.

I was interned for ten days. I returned home on a Friday and that night I received another call from Elena, who guided me on the phone into Focusing so that I could connect with the pain, letting it know I was listening to it, listening to the anger in me, and letting it know that I knew it was there. While we spoke, the pain lessened, and bit-by-bit, I reduced my medication. We continued to work with “IT” in her office until the pain disappeared completely. By feeling loved, feeling that someone was taking care of me, I could be with the pain and listen to it, and listen to myself.

My daughter’s wedding finally arrived and I am able to say that I enjoyed it. I danced without fear and suffered no consequences. When pain comes in any way, I tell myself — recalling Dr. Sarno — “I know it is psychological and not physical”. While working with Focusing, I could return to my daily activities, but now listening to the messages my body was giving me before they started screaming.

We need to — and should — pay a lot of attention to that sensation that comes warning us and asking us to offer ourselves a little care and love.

— Inés Benezra de Bocles

CONCLUSION

I have learned to thank my body for each emotion or feeling, no matter how heart breaking, threatening, or painful it may be, because I know that by listening to those screams from the soul, listening to my inner being’s need to express itself, and its need to have *more of me* be the protagonist in my life, my body quiets down.

I have learned to allow other parts of myself to enter the scene, even those that are not loved or accepted by others, or perhaps by me, so that I can keep them company in a Focusing way. I have learned to accept that it is not possible for everyone to love me, that pleasing others in order to be loved is to forget about myself, abandoning myself and leaving parts of myself in the mists of my inner caverns.

I have also learned to accept and embrace my humanity, so when my body denounces something in me that I have not been able to hear in other ways (such as, “it hurts”), I know I need to pause and listen to it, always with Focusing as my loving companion.

REFERENCES

- Cornell, A. W. (2005). *The radical acceptance of everything*. Berkeley, CA: Calluna Press.
- Gendlin, E. T. (1978). *Focusing*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Sarno, J, MD. (1984). *Mind over back pain*. New York: William Morrow.

