

# FOCUSING

## A MIND-BODY TOOL FOR WELLNESS

By Reji Mathew, PhD



Reji Mathew, PhD

There is growing recognition of the ways thoughts, feelings, and behaviors impact physical health, and how physical well-being impacts how we think, feel, and behave. Some people refer to this as the “mind-body” connection.

Health and wellness require the mind and body to work together—nourishing each other—engaging the mind to signal the body about what to do and allowing a healthier body to aid in developing a more resilient mind.



Focusing is one tool to help achieve a mind-body connection. For example, maintaining wellness when facing complicated medical challenges requires creative solutions to daily functional quandaries and to secondary emotions that can arise—such as anger, frustration, or anxiety.

Focusing, a therapeutic technique formulated by psychologist Gene Gendlin, is a skill that could help in such circumstances. Dr. Gendlin discovered a process in his clinical work and research among his patients who were successful in achieving wellness: the natural ability to focus and access one's *felt sense*.

## What Is Focusing?

You have probably heard phrases such as "listen to your gut reaction," "getting in touch," "getting in tune," and so forth. Focusing goes deeper; it guides a person to get in touch with his or her *felt sense* about a subject, problem, or distressing symptom. During any given day, our bodies are reacting to the world around us—feeling tense, stressed, over-stimulated, relaxed, and so on. The felt sense is the body's natural ability to register what is going on around us, a capacity that is available to everyone.

"Our bodies are not just physical bodies," explains Dr. Doralee Grindler-Katonah, health psychologist and master trainer in focusing. "The felt sense accessed through focusing is deeper than a gut reaction. We each have a 'living body,' constantly sensing and experiencing things around us in a whole way. The body integrates this information on a level beyond our immediate thinking or feeling—a body-mind connection." Dr. Grindler-Katonah believes that some people may have a natural knack for "tuning in" to a felt experience about a problem, but that tuning in is an ability that everyone can learn with practice and effort.

## When to Use Focusing

Focusing can be utilized on many levels, as a coping strategy to check in with oneself or as a structured practice engaged in by setting aside time to unpack a problem. Here are two common uses for dealing with health concerns.

## Focusing to Cope with Difficult Emotions

When a person is stuck emotionally, focusing can help get to the heart of the problem.

"Felt sense is not the same as a feeling or craving," says Dr. Grindler-Katonah. "When we bring our attention to what is underneath—the grief, fear, anxiety—we are going into the whole of the problem."

This sensibility is critical for people who may feel they do not have a way out of their recurrent symptoms. Dr. Grindler-Katonah notes that focusing is not about curing problems, but about expanding our experience of a problem to all parts of it—our fears, hopes, expectations, desires, and so forth.

In her work applying focusing with patients facing repeated medical stressors, Dr. Grindler-Katonah explains that focusing has expanded patients' emotional experience in the moment. "Many patients undergoing difficult treatments were used to shutting down and lost their ability to sense what they need," she said. "With focusing, they were able to reconnect to how they felt before they became sick and made room for other parts of themselves—the whole of who they are."

## Focusing to Cope with Physical Distress

In the case of coping with physical distress, it is understandable to feel burnt out from the chronic cycle of symptoms; a person can easily lose his or her sense of discriminating what is going on in the body. Some possible focusing-oriented questions commonly provided by focusing instructors to help this type of situation would include the following:

**Taking time to focus:** "Let's take a moment and stop to break down this recurrent problem. I can ask some questions and you can let me know what sounds right to you."

**Supporting a person to process difficult physical symptoms on a felt-sense level:** "Let's take a moment together and keep this physical discomfort company. Do any words or images come to you when you describe this difficulty?"

**Guiding one to stay curious:** "What is it about all of that stress in your knee that you are noticing? Take a moment, and sense everything that comes up for you."

## How to Focus—The Steps

With practice, each person may discover his or her own process for focusing, but for the purpose of learning how to focus, Dr. Gendlin has outlined a set of general steps. Here is an example of how one person made use of this tool in a session with a focusing trainer.

## Clearing a Space

"First, to take a moment to relax, be silent (seated, eyes closed) and ground yourself in your body." In this step a person is encouraged to draw her attention inward and begin sensing her body. The person can identify, one by one, all that concerns her—thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations—without judgment.

The advertisement features a large, stylized text message: "THERE'S A FUN ROCK AND ROLL CYCLE FOR EVERY SPECIAL NEED!" in red and yellow. To the right, a photo shows a young girl named Cherith riding a red adaptive bicycle. Another photo on the left shows a pink adaptive bicycle. The text "WATCH OUR VIDEOS AT WWW.ROCKANDROLLCYCLES.COM!" is at the top right. At the bottom, it says "YOU OR YOUR FRIENDS CAN EARN A CYCLE FREE!!" with a green arrow pointing to the text "TELL THEM ABOUT". The Rock and Roll Cycles logo is at the bottom left, and the website "WWW.ROCKANDROLLCYCLES.COM" is at the bottom right.

A response might sound something like this: “Well, I feel exhausted (*felt sense*) right now, tense (*felt sense*), but also glad that I came to my appointment. But I’m worrying a lot about that math exam that’s coming up, and my knee, if it will get better, and then there’s that argument with my boyfriend last night, and my father’s latest medical results. I feel, I don’t know, just overwhelmed. There is a lot now in my life. I feel tense (*felt sense*).”

### Connecting to the Felt Sense

In the second step, the focusing trainer invites the person to focus on a concern and the physical sense of the problem. The patient is encouraged to “sit with” the unclear sense of feeling tense, overwhelmed, or anxious. The felt sense often begins as a vague, unclear sense of a problem. In this step, the person starts unpacking the felt sense, allowing herself to translate the bodily felt sense into words.

The person might say something like the following: “I feel tense, stressed, a bit jittery (*felt sense*), and I don’t know what it is; this week was not as bad as last week. There is a lot going on, but I feel tense in my hands, my chest, I just feel on edge, a low buzz in my upper torso (*felt sense*).”

### Getting a Handle

In the third step, the trainer asks the patient to describe the felt sense. In focusing, a “handle” is an image, word, or phrase that describes the felt sense, going from general to specific. Patients are encouraged to find a way to describe the quality of the felt sense until they find something—a handle—that describes the felt sense in a fresh way.

The person might say something like the following: “I feel jittery, all wound up (*felt sense*). I am upset (*felt sense*). Yes, that’s it. I am upset that I forget things. I get so anxious that I forget my medication. I forget appointments. I think of myself as a responsible person, that’s it. I am responsible, and I forget sometimes (*handle phrase*).”

### Resonating

Next, the trainer has the person check in with the handle phrase or word, and see if it resonates with her in her body. In this step, the patient is encouraged to “sit with” the felt sense and “give it friendly attention.”

The person might say something like the following: “Yes, I am responsible and I forget. That is it. I am really upset about this disconnect (*felt sense*), I don’t know why. I don’t want it to be this way. I feel lighter, a little bit of a release in my chest (*felt sense*). I felt so tense before, but now that I connected to that phrase, ‘I am responsible and I forget sometimes,’ that changed things for me on the inside. I feel relieved (*felt sense*).”



### Asking

To go deeper into focusing, the trainer can then have the person ask her felt sense a question, such as, “What is it about the whole problem that makes you feel this quality?” In this step, the patient is allowing herself to debrief with her new felt sense about the problem to gain more insight.

The person might say: “I am responsible and I do forget things. That feels right, that feels better (*felt sense*). Maybe I can accept both things, that forgetting things does not mean that I am not responsible. I can get better at trying to not forget or if I forget, I can learn from it. I am relieved (*felt sense*). The other way I was thinking about it made me so anxious (*felt sense*).”

### Receiving

The last step is to have the person take in whatever new idea, insight, or piece of information came and sit with it for a moment. Depending on the nature of the problem, the person is advised that she may have to come back to unpack the subject further or, if she feels the issue is resolved, to “welcome what came.”

The person might say: “I feel relieved (*felt sense*) to feel that I am responsible, and I also do forget things sometimes, that I am human, and that I need to take care of myself so I don’t get stressed to the point of forgetting.”

### To Learn More

To learn more about focusing, contact the Focusing Institute for reading materials, workshops, or to find a trainer. It is an invaluable wellness tool that can help each person foster a mind-body connection and build the confidence to process difficult moments of physical and emotional challenges as paths to new ways of coping and being. [www.focusing.org](http://www.focusing.org)

*Dr. Reji Mathew is a health advocacy writer. The main focus of her work is to promote coping skills education for persons with chronic illness and disability. Her clinical expertise is in integrative psychotherapy, particularly cognitive-behavioral skills training. Reach her via e-mail at her Web site: [rejimatthewwriter.com](mailto:rejimatthewwriter.com).*

---

“First, to take a moment to relax, be silent (seated, eyes closed) and ground yourself in your body. In this step a person is encouraged to draw her attention inward and begin sensing her body. The person can identify, one by one, all that concerns her—thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations—with judgment.”

Reji Mathew, PhD