

# THE INTERACTIVE METHOD

*THE PATH OF HEALING  
THROUGH EMPATHY AND COMPASSION*

COMBINED EDITION

VOLUME ONE: THE PROCESS

VOLUME TWO: APPLICATIONS

VOLUME THREE: OUT OF THE PRACTICE

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## **The Experiencing of Experience:**

### ***Interactive Focusing as a Way to Heal Experiencing Deficit Disorder***

*The experiencing of experience is not to just have the experience, nor is it only to become aware of having the experience, but it is to have the experience in such a way that the experience becomes part of your moving forward fabric. You process the experience and incorporate it meaningfully into yourself. It is the basis for growing in this moment and it is the foundation for further healthy growth. Truly experiencing the experience is being aware of it, digesting it, metabolizing it, sensing it fully, utilizing it in your living process, letting it guide you to your truths and letting it be the foundation for the building of a healthy self. There must be some selection so we have a discernment mechanism to identify those experiences we need to process.*

### **The original wound to the self-**

It is my contention that damage to our ability to experience is the original narcissistic wound (wound to the self) that stands in the way of all further healthy narcissistic and interpersonal development. *Not until we can "have our experience" can we utilize experience for that which it was intended, our human development.* And not until repair to the experiencing mechanism is accomplished can we move forward in our healthy human development. This makes Gendlin's discovery of the bodysense paramount in the fields of psychotherapy and human development, for I also contend that it is through the bodysense that we not only discover our experience, but that we can unblock it, and we can move our experience forward.

I, also, will want to look at another facet of this problem because I believe that the wounding was in a context, that is, there was something in the environment that caused the arrest of development to take place. I want to introduce as part of the healing, the right environment. I want to introduce the dynamic environment of Interactive Focusing.

### **My definition of "experience"-**

I don't want to get overly complicated and tie this up in philosophical knots, but I do want to give a base-line definition for "experience." Experience has to do with our life events, intangible as well as tangible. When events occur in our lives, there is a way through a complex of modes that we take these in. We take them in with our senses, we make meaning of them with our mind-body, we feel them with our emotions, we are moved by them, we recognize them as units by themselves and we see their interconnection with what is already recorded inside of us. Experience is both unto itself and part of our larger becoming. This is neither an exhaustive nor a precise description, but

it is something to work with. Of course, at this juncture, I invite you to formulate your own definition of experience.

**What is the “experiencing of experience?”**

Perhaps our potentially greatest narcissistic wounding is to our mechanism to experience our experience. The concept of the “experiencing of experience,” while it may sound a bit strange to the ear, isn’t at all difficult to comprehend. I am not meaning this to be dense or confusing. It seems easy enough to recognize that we can have experiences of which we are unaware. It seems easy enough to know that we have, from early on, been told not to have our own experience or have it another way. It seems easy enough to understand that we can have experiences that we misperceive, misinterpret or misunderstand. Each of us can probably easily recapture instances of misperceived, misinterpreted, misunderstood, unrecognized, denied, disallowed as well as other forms of un-experienced experiences. So we have personal validation of this.

**Experiences of which we are unaware-**

Experiences of which we are unaware don’t have to be only those as extreme as repressed memories about such things as sexual molestation or physical abuse. These can be much more common events such as not being invited to a classmate’s birthday party, or being told to be brave and not to cry when we fall down, or not getting a shiny bicycle like our sister did or parenting a chronically depressed parent....

They don’t even have to be those experiences that we repress because they are negative and painful. There is a possibility that we don’t remember some things because they are too pleasurable...and we have colluded with the admonition that pleasure is sinful. Another positive event we are unable to tolerate and incorporate maybe something that is too exciting. At a young age, the excitation of pleasurable events can be too overwhelming for our nervous system. This excessive excitation can be painful. And there can even be the combination of pleasurable events that are socially disallowed joined to excitation that is too overwhelming.

**Experiences we have been told not to have and experiences we have been told to have another way-**

For this I want to repeat a transcript of an Interactive Focusing session from my article *Experiential Teaching*:

**Jerry:** I’d like to tell you a little about what I just got in touch with when I went down inside. It is very surprising. I’m a little shaken, moved off center about it. I mean, I didn’t know it was there. This morning I was playing with my son at the beach. He’s just three years old. I was holding him in my

arms. Big waves were crashing up against us, and one hit me behind the knee, and I buckled. We went down into the surf, and he got splashed in the face. He started crying. I immediately said to him, "Don't cry. You're such a big boy, such a brave soldier."

**Lynn:** Let me see if I got all of that. This morning when you were playing...

**J:** No. I really don't need you to say all that back. What I really wanted you to hear is that when my son started crying I said to him, "Don't cry. You're such a big boy, such a brave soldier." *(Jerry gives immediate feedback sensing he doesn't need to hear the scene-setting, only the crux of it.)*

**L:** You just need to hear what you said to your son, "Don't cry. You're such a big boy, such a brave soldier." *(Lynn immediately adjusts her reflection to fit the feedback which is important so the storyteller will feel empowered, that his feedback was responded to.)*

**J:** Yes. Yesss! What sadness comes here for me. I actually want to cry. It touches into something that happened a lot in my own family, and something I promised myself I would never, never, never do to anyone else – tell someone not to have their own experience and make them have an experience the way I thought was okay or socially acceptable.

**L:** Sadness and tears come here for you. It is about all that old stuff in your own family where you weren't allowed to have your own experience...

**J:** *(Jerry interrupts Lynn)* Well sadness comes, but no tears. I only want to cry. You know, I can't really cry. All the children in my family, especially the boys, were told they shouldn't cry. You were a sissy if you cried. "Bennett men don't cry!" I can't remember the last time I cried. But right now I really want to cry. I realized when you said, "Tears come for you," that no tears came. I only really wanted to cry for what I had just done to my son...mmm...and what had been done to me. *(Jerry realized that Lynn hadn't been accurate in her reflection when he resonated it against what was there. In resonating he gives her feedback about what he actually said... and lets her know what more came from the resonating...that he hadn't been allowed to cry as a child, that he was doing the same thing to his own son, and this made him want to cry, but he couldn't.)*

**L:** It is really that you want to cry but no tears come...both for what you did to your son and what was done to you.

**J:** Yes. You got the words right, but I can't sense that you really get how sad it is for me. You said it so quickly. I think I need to hear it a little slower and softer. *(Jerry gets that Lynn said back all the right words, but he is sensing something is missing in the delivery. This is more subtle and delicate feedback.)*

*L: You're sensing something off in the way I just said that. Let me slow it down a bit. It's been a very long time since you were allowed...and you allowed yourself to cry. You want to cry and no tears come. You weren't allowed to cry...and just this morning you did the same thing to your own child, something you promised yourself you would never, never do. You didn't allow him his own experience...you didn't allow him to cry. (The feedback really seems to help Lynn touch into more empathic and caring listening. Lynn gets that she not only was too fast in her delivery, but maybe she didn't take enough time to really get it empathically. Her second attempt seems to genuinely try to capture the pain Jerry was suffering, empathically and compassionately.)*

*J: Mmm...I'm touching into something very tender...bruised. I need some time to just be with myself here. Could you sit here with me...quietly? (Jerry senses he needs quiet time and gives Lynn feedback so she can be with him in the way he needs in this moment.)*

#### **Experiences we misperceive, misinterpret or misunderstand-**

These are easiest to identify when we have shared an event or experience with another person that is recorded differently by each party. This brings to mind the classic Japanese movie, *Rashomon*. Several people witnessed a murder. The movie concerns itself with revealing the disparate story of each.

#### **Diagnosing the disease from the symptoms-**

When the conditions such as denied, forgotten, misperceived, misunderstood, reconstructed and disallowed experiences are present, there is an obvious speculation that the mechanism by which we experience our experience is "broken."

It seems almost like the AIDS of "psychological illness." That is, physically, if our immune system is compromised, we cannot fight off illness. AIDS compromises the immune system. AIDS is a complex of illnesses, consequently we cannot fight off AIDS. Almost the perfect circularity of disease?

A dysfunctional experiencing mechanism is almost the perfect defense against experiencing, itself. Again, the almost flawless circularity of psychological disease. The psyche is defended against experience at the same time it is prevented from using experience for human development that would allow us to utilize experience for healing.

We can diagnose the disease, but does Experiencing Deficit Disorder have a healing that is easier to get at than the cure for AIDS? I'd like to explore that.

**Focusing arises out of the need *not* primarily to bring our experience into focus, but out of our primary need to focus on our experience-**

And all of this is what led to the need for Focusing itself. I imagine that the ability to experience entered into the world with each of us at birth and while it was not in a developed state, certainly it was not in a disabled state. That is, it is reasonable to speculate that most if not all of our abilities came factory-fresh and in a relatively functional state. It is in the development of our abilities that the disabling occurs, that injury occurs, that development-run-amok occurs. Except in instances of specific congenital illness, almost all of us have the potential for healthy development. For instance, looking at our physical being, our skeletal structure grows large enough to accommodate our internal organs, strong enough to facilitate our musculature, architecturally competent enough to allow an adequate range of motion, and so on.

There is no reason to assume that our psychological development would not have a parallel course of right expression or of right consuming of potential...given a relatively healthy environment, one that I will call a "good enough" environment

**Identifying our experience experiencing mechanism-**

What is the mechanism for experiencing our experience? Is it the bodysense? Since the bodysense has been defined by Gendlin as almost all-inclusive and all-encompassing regarding experience, perhaps. Gendlin identified the bodysense as the mechanism that allowed us to talk *from* our experience, not just talk *about* it. My own personal story would strongly favor this conclusion. I was quite out of touch with my own experience until I was introduced to the bodysense and Focusing.

To some extent, each of us suffers from some compromise or disabling of our experiencing mechanism. This gives us the opportunity to test this hypothesis. Please join me here either in remembering back to an outcome already experienced in an Interactive Focusing session or in tracking a future session. By following the Focusing process, can we get in touch with experience that was heretofore unavailable to us? I am asking you to step beyond the simpler question of whether through Focusing you can bring an experience into clarity, into focus. I am asking you to actually see whether using the bodysense helps you contact experience that was somehow previously distorted, denied and un-experienced.

**What is the royal road back to experiencing our experience?**

We may come at the road back to experiencing by eliminating one of the ways most often prescribed, "Become aware of your experience." We get caught in the trap of thinking that injunction is a solution. The very reason we

are unaware isn't oversight. It has to do with something that went awry, and this thing that went awry is limiting us from the awareness of our experience.

Would it, then, be fruitful to search out what went awry that limits our awareness of experience? That might be an avenue, but it is characteristic of defense mechanisms, especially those associated with denial (repression, suppression, projection, avoidance...), that they are quite well-practiced, firmly entrenched and intransigent.

### **Creating a "right environment" for allowing the experiencing of experience-**

Perhaps going forward rather than looking backward is the healthier solution to re-attaching to our experience, and one that has a greater chance of being successful. The question becomes, if something in the environment were responsible for disabling our experience-awareness-mechanism as well as our experience-experiencing mechanism, what would be a way of creating a right environment that would allow for the recovery and growth of the ability to experience our experiences? I contend that Interactive Focusing creates a right environment for the healing of our experiencing mechanism.

### **Too strong defenses or maladaptive defenses-**

Theodore Bellack postulated a physio-psychological mechanism he named the stimulus barrier. It is useful. It allows us to protect ourselves against over-stimulation in a variety of ways – too much physical activity, too much noise, too much visual stimulation, too much affective stimulation, too much intellectual stimulation and so on. Freud also notes the value of limiting psychological stimulation and finds the defense mechanism of repression very important. So it is obvious that we aren't intended to be aware of all of our experience, or to experience everything we are capable of perceiving. We do need some form of barrier or defense. We must, however, protect ourselves from excessive or maladaptive defenses.

It is when the pendulum swings too far in the other direction that potentially very harmful things can happen. Through the disease process, diabetics can develop peripheral neuropathy. Their nerves deteriorate to the point that they lose sensation in their extremities. They get blisters on their feet without any awareness at all of this happening. A more pervasive physical condition called dysautonomia is even more disabling. It is the interference with feeling things physically. Children with this disorder usually don't live long because of, amongst other things, the continual injuries sustained from not sensing. In other words, a basic defense or warning system against injury has been eliminated.

There are similar psychological disorders. Anhedonia leaves us with the inability to experience joy. Alexithymia is more pervasive – it leaves us with the inability literally to “put words to or name (or feel) our moods.”

It helps us to look at parallel worlds (the physical and the psychological), and it helps us to look at extreme disorders to more clearly identify experiencing deficit disorder.

#### **Gendlin’s discovery-**

The more mid-range of disability to our psyches is what Gendlin noticed. We were out of touch with our own experiences. We might be intellectually aware of them. We knew that they happened. We could speak *about* them. But we didn’t have an inner experience of them. We couldn’t speak *from* them. Gendlin said that perhaps the most painful condition is the inability to experience, to be out of touch with our own inner experience.

Gendlin came up with a brilliant formulation, the bodily felt sense (bodysense). Is this mere speculation that we have within us, in the area of the torso, a mechanism for experiencing? Is there a physiology of experiencing? I don’t know whether we have the answers to that yet. Nor do I think that the answers will come from physical science or applying the methods of scientific investigation to the intangible, the psyche or the *zeit*, the spirit. And, in fact, there is doubt that we need an answer to that. We have a large population practicing the process called Focusing that Gendlin developed to aid us in accessing our bodysense which leads us to our experiencing and the clarifying of the experience. This means that we have testimonials, albeit anecdotal – personal accounts, about the outcomes of using this bodysense, real or imagined.

A fortuitous property of the bodysense is that it appears to have its own right knowing of how much is enough...going neither too deeply into an issue nor to shallowly.

#### **Circling back-**

Why do we need to clarify or bring our experience into Focus? As Gendlin says, Focusing helps us bring our fuzzy picture of our experience into clear relief. And why is our experience fuzzy? *Voila!* Because we are out of touch with our experiencing, because our mechanism for experiencing has been disabled, because we can get a vague, diffuse sense of our experience...but we need a corrective practice to bring it into Focus. An out-of-focus experience is, after all, an un-experienced experience or a skewed experience. If our experiencing mechanism were functional, we would doubtfully need a practice such as Focusing.

#### **Is Focusing enough?**

Is Focusing or bringing experience into focus enough, I rhetorically ask. I think not. If we could get in touch with our experience and, perhaps over time, correct our dysfunctional experiencing mechanism through Focusing, would that be enough? Again, no. What more is needed is a way to not only access and repair our dysfunctional experiencing mechanism, but a way to correct the environment in which the experiencing mechanism became dysfunctional.

This is where Interactive Focusing enters the picture. Interactive Focusing uses the guide of bodysensing to bring us to our experience. We practice being in touch with our experience through Focusing. Interactive Focusing brings the attributes of "right environment" which were absent from the original, wounding environment. Chief among these attributes is compassionate, empathic listening in the form of not only a trained but a caring listener. This is where the repair of the experiencing mechanism enters, and this is where the "good enough" environment also arrives.

As an intern in my doctoral program, I worked in a residential facility for behaviorally disordered adolescent boys. The stories of their woundings were unfathomable. While they were in the facility, some progress was made, some healing went on. The problem was that they were returned to the same dysfunctional homes and surroundings on release from the facility. Their wounding and dysfunction became like a revolving door. Soon the gains were erased and more remediation was needed.

Interactive Focusing provides an ongoing, "good enough" environment to remedy the defects of the original damaging environment. Briefly reviewing what Interactive Focusing is helps delineate why it works to repair the chief narcissistic wound – the wounding that impairs the function of our ability to experience.

Interactive Focusing, first, is firmly anchored in the practice of Focusing – using the bodysense to contact our experience and then bring it into focus. Through the bodysense, we can process our experience. Interactive Focusing is also based in the intention to be empathic and compassionate listeners to others and to be self-empathic and self-compassionate. The structure of Interactive Focusing brings balance to the process, and the intention of Interactive Focusing creates the environment of safety and trust necessary to contact our experience. Having someone with you who is empathic and compassionate creates a corrective environment, making this a new experience with the possibility of new outcomes. Please see my article *Interactive Focusing* for a fuller description.

**To individual knowing and truth through experience-**

How deeply, accurately and completely we can know our own experience is also how deeply, accurately and completely we can know our own truth.

Experience is partly about what has occurred, so we can anchor our working this forward in the event itself. Experience is also a generative event. By this I mean experience creates more than the experience, we grow from it. This is why experience can lead to our knowing our truths. But that is dependent on how deeply and completely we can experience our experience and how fully we can open to knowing the depth of our experience. This is where our human development begins, with experience.

**To conclude-**

I have said that *Focusing arises out of the need not primarily to bring our experience into focus, but out of our primary need to focus on our experience.* I believe this is true.

I have said that *Interactive Focusing uses the guide of bodysensing to bring us to our experience. We practice being in touch with our experience through Focusing. Interactive Focusing brings the attributes of "right environment" which were absent from the original, wounding environment. Chief among these attributes is compassionate, empathic listening in the form of not only a trained but a caring listener. This is where the repair of the experiencing mechanism enters, and this is where the "good enough" environment also arrives.* This I also believe to be true.

I have said that there is a painful disease afoot I call Experiencing Deficit Disorder. It is partly my concern about EDD that occasioned this paper. I hope I have helped point the way to healing. While we don't yet have a vaccine, we do have an effective treatment – Interactive Focusing.