

Ten Ways to Use Focusing in Daily Life

by Ann Weiser Cornell

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Often what wanted my attention was a feeling about something that had happened to me earlier. I might find, for example, a tightness in my chest that was connected to an argument with my roommate three days before. It wasn't until my Focusing session that I realized how hurt something in me had felt, from that argument. That hurt part of me still needed attention, and that was fine, I could do that in the Focusing.

But wouldn't it have been great, I thought, to know sooner about my reaction... right after the argument perhaps, or even, heaven help us, during!

I can't tell you the moment or the day that I realized I was starting to use Focusing in the midst of life, rather than just in those special Focusing times. But it happened, and now I feel I'm really "living a Focusing life." Oh yes, of course there are times when I lose touch with that inner knowing that Focusing brings. But they are fewer and farther between.

Here are ten ways that people can use Focusing in daily life. Some are my own experiences, others are stories that friends and colleagues have told me. I am sure there are more than ten ways, and with this start, you will probably find many more. Do let me know...

1. Ouch, that hurt! In the days before I learned Focusing, I could carry around unacknowledged hurts for weeks and even months. A friend didn't invite me to her party, a

teacher praised another student's work, my dad commented that I had gained weight. I had grown up in a mode of "smoothing things over" – don't notice, don't tell, don't rock the boat. The result: by my early 20s, I wasn't aware of my own feelings unless they were pleasant and "nice." As I began to do Focusing, I began to discover hurts from the past, places in me that carried bruises from bumps I hadn't noticed when they happened. But when Focusing really came into my daily life was the day I actually noticed one of these bumps when it happened. "Ouch, that hurts!" Whether or not I said it out loud didn't matter as much as the fact that I knew, and acknowledged, how I felt.

2. "Something is wrong." Sometimes a felt sense can tell us that something is wrong. Buddy Maynes told me about a time he was in his woodworking studio, about to start work on a cabinet. The wood was all purchased and he was about to make the first cut. But he hesitated. He had a felt sense: "Something is wrong." His logical mind said, "Oh go ahead, you already measured twice." But the felt sense persisted. Sure enough, when he checked one more time, the lengths were wrong, and cutting would have ruined the project. A time this happened to me was when I was leaving a room where I'd been staying in the Netherlands. I had a strong feeling that I needed to make the bed. My logical mind said, "Why? They'll have to change the sheets anyway." But every time I passed the bed, I felt drawn to make it. So I did – and found my private journal which I had left under the pillow and would have forgotten.

3. "Let me check if that feels like something I can do." In the old days, I would say Yes to every request. Take care of your plants while you're on vacation? Be on another committee? Write up the notes of the meeting? Bring cookies? Sure, of course, be glad to. Before Focusing, I didn't know about a place inside me where I could check if the request really fit for me. So I would be "nice" and always say Yes. Then I would find myself not doing many of the things I had promised to do, and I would berate myself

for letting people down. But really, it was the part of me that I hadn't checked with, doing what it had wanted all along. Changing this habit wasn't just a matter of bringing Focusing into my daily life, and sensing what I really wanted. First of all it took many hours of Focusing (with a partner) with the part of me that felt it wasn't OK to say no to people. Working with Marshall Rosenberg's Non-Violent Communication (www.cnvc.org) also helped me respect my own needs. I came to understand that honoring my own needs also honored the person who was asking for the favor. Then Focusing when being asked became easy.

4. "I need some time." Before Focusing, I thought that I had to stay in an emotional interaction, like an argument with a boyfriend, no matter what. I would become upset, and say things I wish I hadn't said, partly out of a feeling of being trapped in the discussion. After learning and practicing Focusing for a while, I discovered that I had the right to say, "I need some time to take in what you're saying and sort out how I feel." Because I was honoring my own right to do that, I still felt connected to the other person, and they could feel that... so my request didn't feel scary to them. Sometimes the time requested was literally a minute, closing my eyes and sensing right there in the room. And sometimes I would take a walk, or go to my own room, for a longer time. Once both of us were back in the discussion, it always benefitted from the time taken to get in touch with our selves.

5. "I changed my mind." I told my foster daughter that she could move back in with me. Then, things changed. My 22-year-old nephew, son of my sister who died seven years ago, needed a place to live. I thought it would be OK to have both of them in the house that my partner and I use for home and office, but the body sense kept saying "no." My foster daughter was making plans to move back and I needed to tell her that I had changed my mind. I needed several Focusing sessions to listen to all the parts of me involved – and then I needed to listen to my foster

daughter as well! But it was Focusing in the midst of life that signaled me in the first place that my plans needed to change. Now she is happily living in student housing nearby and we see each other often. The other day she told me she feels a great sense of confidence, knowing she can live in her own place.

6. “What feels right to do next?” Organizing experts often say it's best to plan your day the night before, and identify the most important items to do. But with Focusing in the midst of life, sensing what's most important can happen moment by moment. Buddy Maynes had a glow on this face when he told me how he is combining these two methods. “I start by doing the most important task, the one I decided the night before. And from then on, all day long, I sense what would be right to do next. I let a feeling come into my body of how right it feels to do that, and then I enjoy doing it much more!”

7. “What shall I get my friend for a present?” Choosing and buying (or making) gifts for people is so much more fun, and more satisfying, now that I use Focusing. I get a whole felt sense of the person, and walk around with it for a few days, checking in with it from time to time. When an idea comes, I will offer it to the felt sense. Often what happens is that, rather than seeing a specific gift, I will feel drawn to a certain store, with a sense that I will find something there. It's amazing how often that turns out to be true.

8. “What does this creative project need?” Other than in my work, my creativity expresses itself these days in designing and knitting sweaters for my numerous nephews and nieces. But this tip works for any kind of creativity: writing, painting, sculpture, jewelry design, landscape gardening... It's this: It feels so much better to sense what's next than to try to think about it logically. Like all uses of Focusing, this requires a pause, stopping to sense rather than just rushing in. “Hmmm... conventionally we'd use a

knit-purl ribbing here... but it feels like that shape isn't right for this yarn and this person... maybe reverse stockinette... no that would make the edge roll up... how about garter stitch... Yes, that feels good, let's try it." Once I try my new idea, I pause again, to check if it actually works the way I felt it. I may go on, or I may need to adjust what I'm doing. This rhythm of pausing, sensing, doing, and then pausing and sensing again is like what happens in a Focusing session when we find a word or symbol to describe what we're feeling... and then check again of that word is right.

9. "Let's not move on yet – it doesn't feel

complete." Before Focusing, I didn't know how to sit in a meeting and track my own felt senses about the discussions and the decisions being made. By the time I joined the board of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, in the 90s, I had learned how to trust my own inner process. So I would find myself saying, in a decision-making meeting: "Let's not move on yet – something about this doesn't feel complete." I discovered that I was never alone once I had said this; there was always at least one other person nodding their head, having sensed something similar. We were able to stay with the felt sense of what felt "off" or "incomplete" about the decision, and the final outcome would be more solid, more thorough – altogether a better decision. I wasn't the only one who did this... but I was grateful to Focusing as the process that showed me how.

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