

Bringing Focusing to a Counselling Supervision Group

Certification Project by Paula Newman

Co-mentors: Ann Weiser Cornell and Fiona Parr

Introduction

I supervise a group of three female counsellors for a college counselling service, we meet for two hours twice a month and this is our second year together. I hope that group members will find Focusing personally beneficial and that it will enhance our explorations of their work. We have the whole academic year for this project.

The supervision group

Yalom provides a broad definition of group cohesiveness:

Members feeling warmth and comfort in the group, feeling they belong, valuing the group and feeling in turn that they are valued and unconditionally accepted and supported by other members'. (Yalom, I, 1955)

Supervisees have commented upon feeling supported by myself and each other. They have been courageous in sharing perceived mistakes, uncomfortable feelings and personal issues that affect their work. I feel valued and valuing of each individual and of the group as a whole.

We work collaboratively meaning that each person contributes to our explorations of counselling relationships, ethical practice and supervisees' personal and professional development. I hope that in this environment supervisees will feel comfortable enough to try something new and to include focusing within supervision. When I mention my project everyone is willing to participate.

At the start of my project I Focus upon how to go about it

One way is to create a structure for bringing Focusing to the group and having some objective way of measuring the results.

I close my eyes which helps me to pay attention to my inner experiencing. After a while I become aware of sensations in my body which I associate with a structured approach.

Something in my throat feels restricted, sort of tight, I keep swallowing. I notice a pulsing pressure at the back of my forehead, a type of dull pain, throbbing.

Another possibility is to include Focusing when I sense that it will be helpful, allowing a process to unfold. I could support Focusing with explanations, discussion and written material. Rather than asking for feedback in a formal manner such as questionnaires, I could ask supervisees for their responses as we go along. I get a sense of what this feels like in my body.

I take deep, deep breaths, filling my lungs with oxygen, a sense of openness, freedom.

The second way involves trusting my intuition and my sense of what is helpful whilst also trusting that something worthwhile will emerge. This feels more risky with a nervous excitement – fluttering butterflies in my stomach.

I take into account the restriction associated with working in a structured way and the freedom of trusting and seeing what emerges. I acknowledge the butterflies and the sense of riskiness associated with a lack of structure. I notice where my energy lies and decide to take the second path.

Rogers' words speak to the part of me which enjoys a sense of freedom when I am able to trust myself and my own resources.

Slowly I learned to trust the feelings, the ideas, the purposes that continually emerge in me. It was not an easy learning but a most valuable and continuing one. I found myself becoming much freer, more real, more deeply understanding. (Rogers, C.R, 1995).

The first term

To begin with we talk about the project and discuss confidentiality. Each supervisee chooses a pseudonym for me to use in my written work - Julie, Rebecca and Robyn.

On my journey home from the first session I feel panicky, my breathing quickens and my chest tightens I keep saying to myself 'I don't know what I'm doing'. This is not my whole experience, a more confident part of me is enjoying the adventure and not knowing makes it even more fascinating. However right now I am merging with the panicky part, I am feeling overwhelmed and seeing my project from its panicky perspective.

Being Self- in-Presence

I say to myself '*I am sensing something in me that is panicking*'. This helps me to be in relationship with the panicky part. The phrase '*Something in me*' reminds me that there is also a confident part and that I can be in relationship with the panicky part, whilst not merging with it.

I acknowledge the panicky part, it feels heard and relaxes. My breathing becomes more even as I calm down.

Being Self-in-Presence involves seeing the whole picture and paying attention to whatever is going on within me, a panicky part a confident part and so on. All parts are welcome, there is space for everything. In struggles between parts, for example a part that is angry and a part that is ashamed of being angry I listen to each one without bias. Certain parts are hesitant in coming forward, others are forthright. I remain gentle, patient and interested, listening with empathy and acceptance, acknowledging

whatever comes, keeping a part company when that is needed. When I am Self-in-Presence, extending these attitudes of empathy, acceptance and gentle curiosity towards other people is a natural continuation.

*When our self is in a state of Presence, we are capable of acting with flow, sensing the whole situation (given the limits of what we can be aware of), connecting with our here-and-now experience, and interacting freely with our environment. Let's call this **Self-in-Presence**. (McGavin B, and Cornell, A, 1994-2010).*

We start supervision sessions with a Lead In

I give supervisees Lead Ins to help them bring their awareness to their bodies and to be Self-in-Presence. At the same time I am also leading myself in.

I invite supervisees to get a sense of their whole body, before sensing into their outer body, arms, legs etc and inwards to their throat, chest and stomach, noticing sensations in all these areas, being aware of their breathing, whether it is fast, slow, deep or shallow. We take time to see if something feels easy and flowing and then wait patiently.

Supervisee's Responses to lead ins

Supervisees' responses following lead ins suggest that they are experiencing what it is like to bring awareness to their bodies and that achieving this is not always easy:

Julie describes 'a lolling back feeling'. Whilst she knows that she is sitting upright, she has a sense of lying down which she finds quite strange, she associates this with feeling deeply relaxed.

Rebecca is aware of sensations in various parts of her body and notices a difference in how the back and front of her body feel. At the back there is tightness and tension which she associates with some anxieties. The front of her body 'feels fine'.

Robyn - *It allows me to arrive properly. This is the first time I've been silent and really noticed what is going on within me.*

Rebecca - *I'm noticing the tiredness, really feeling the tiredness.*

Julie - *It's very hard to be in touch with my body - I'm not used to it.*

Congruence and Focusing

Congruence has been described as genuineness, sincerity and being real. Counsellors are aware of what they are experiencing whilst they are with clients. This allows them to respond honestly and to share anything which seems to be of therapeutic benefit. Thoughts and feelings which are not considered helpful, or which need to be processed before they are disclosed to clients can be put aside and explored in personal counselling and in supervision as necessary.

There is consistency between what counsellors are experiencing and their responses to clients. Ideally the counsellor experiences unconditional positive regard (non-judgmental acceptance, warmth, respect) and empathy (deep understanding from the client's perspective) and communicates these attitudes to the client.

Facilitating supervisees in developing congruence is an important aspect of supervision since congruence enables counsellors to be trustworthy, authentic and more fully engaged in their relationships with clients.

In my view Focusing can enhance congruence since it is a process of paying attention to one's inner experiencing thereby increasing self-awareness. The process is gentle and patient. It begins with the Focuser bringing awareness to their body, often but not necessarily with a *Lead In* (p.3) and getting a sense of any bodily sensations. At first there may be a *felt sense* of something that is difficult to grasp.

In his book *Focusing*, (2005) Eugene Gendlin explains his term 'felt sense'.

A felt sense doesn't come to you in the form of thoughts or words or other separate units, but as a single (though often puzzling and very complex) bodily feeling. (Gendlin, E.T, 2005).

A felt sense can give us a fresh sense of a situation. It is about getting a whole body sense of something that is not yet fully formed. The Focuser listens with empathy, acceptance and compassion. In this environment it is safe for sensations to become clearer and for more to emerge.

A supervisee Focuses with her Felt Sense

Rebecca has a vague sense of 'something is going on' in a client relationship. I suggest that she might like to just sit with it for a bit, noticing what comes as she keeps it company. Rebecca becomes aware of an all over tiredness and feeling sick. We acknowledge these sensations and wait. Eventually Rebecca starts describing it. 'It feels like a dance with me trying to catch my client and her slipping away'. I reflect what Rebecca has said and she is quiet for a while. Then she remembers dropping off to sleep for a few moments after the session. She continues 'It felt like I was chasing my client and there was a voice saying 'I want to counsel my client and she's not letting me'. Rebecca identifies this as a 'child's voice', a part of her which is coming into her relationship with the client. She acknowledges this part.

Rebecca could continue by saying 'hello' to this part, keeping it company and giving it some time. She notes that there is more for her to explore here and that this is something that she wants to return to. As the Focuser Rebecca is in charge, so in terms of her personal material we stop there, turning our attention towards the client's issues.

Providing the group with more information about Focusing

Afterwards I ask Rebecca about how Focussing on this issue has been for her 'was that Focusing?' she asks surprised. So far supervisees have experienced Focusing without the distraction of explanations which might take them to a more intellectual place. Rebecca's remark indicates to me that it is time to explain more. I send an email to supervisees explaining about Lead Ins and Self-in-Presence, telling them that they are welcome to ask about or to discuss anything of interest during the next session.

In the next session we discuss creating a space through being Self-in-Presence. Rebecca wonders whether being self-in presence lessens the intensity of an experience, reducing the depth of explorations. Julie and Robyn feel that spaciousness prevents them from becoming overwhelmed by an experience, making it safer to explore at a deep level.

Throughout the year I provide information based upon supervisee's questions, group discussions and my sense of what is helpful. I explain that there is no obligation to read the information and that I am also ready to discuss anything of interest.

Feedback

As we approach the end of term I invite supervisees to give me feedback, welcoming both written and verbal comments. The feedback falls into four areas:

Relating Focusing to other approaches Julie and Rebecca both find that there is something familiar about Focusing because of its association for them with other approaches. Julie says *'I really like the Lead In, it is a similar experience to mindfulness'*. Rebecca writes *I can only think of it in relation to the rest of my training both in Reichian body work and Gestalt and there seems to be elements of both in it.*

Lead Ins All three supervisees find Lead Ins helpful. Robyn says *'helps me to arrive and clear my mind'* and *'brought me somewhere and I could explore a bit more deeply'*. Julie says *'helps me to be more calm, it allows the chattering to make its way out'*. Rebecca writes *'the exercises we have done in which we become aware of our body and of any feeling located there I have found grounding'*.

Connecting with their bodies Robyn says *'I'm aware of what I'm not feeling, like I'm looking for something'*. Julie says *'I struggle to connect to an actual feeling'*. Rebecca writes *I have found it easier to locate some feelings in my body than others - anxiety stands out for me as something I feel in a very physical way. Sometimes if I can't locate any feeling I go into my head and worry about it and then I can guarantee I won't find anything!'*

Balance in bringing Focusing to Supervision Supervisees would all like more Focusing. Robyn talks about wanting more and also wanting to make sure that there is sufficient time for client work. She feels that she is 'missing' in not having more Focusing. Rebecca finds that Focusing facilitates supervisory enquiry. Julie says *'I would like a bit more when talking about clients, exploring what I am feeling now'*. Rebecca agrees and says *'but don't we do that anyway?'*

My own process

Frequently there is a part of me that is unsure. Does each person feel heard and supported? Are they benefitting? Is this the best use of their supervision time? Nervously this part hangs back, wary of imposing my project on others, bearing in mind that the position of supervisor holds a degree of power and authority. So I say 'hello' to this part with its doubts and its hesitancy, making a space for it.

At the same time there is another part which has a more vibrant energy. I notice it wanting to push forward and I sense into a tight frustration deep in my chest. I acknowledge this part, making a space for it too.

Personal Supervision

My supervisor and I both Focus upon bringing more Focusing to the supervision group. There is a strong sensation in my arms, they want to stretch out as widely as possible and I am aware of an energy and excitement around embracing Focusing more fully within the group. My supervisor talks about 'integration' and we reflect upon integrating focusing in a more complete and flowing way.

The Second Term

During the first term a structure has emerged. Following a lead in we share and reflect. Then we divide the remaining time between supervisees to explore their supervisory issues. Focusing is brought in as relevant. We then say our goodbyes.

Now I ask supervisees if they would like to try something different and less structured. With their agreement we have a lead in and then stay open to going wherever this takes us. In order to be more integrated within the group I focus too, inviting supervisees to respond to myself and to each other. After the lead in there is a long silence. Within myself I notice an anxious part 'what if nothing happens?' and a trusting part 'something always happens'.

Eventually we are focusing and responding to each other. I sense into the pain at the back of my head and the tension which I am experiencing. I share this with the group. There are some reflections from supervisees and then Julie expresses her concern for me having to supervise with a headache. I am moved by Julie's caring and I also feel well enough to supervise. After explaining this we reflect upon self-disclosure with clients. Robyn mentions not disclosing hot flushes, there is laughter as we note physical matters which we experience and rarely share with clients.

Julie is seeing a client with an issue that she has herself. When her client asked her a direct question she considered it appropriate to be honest and open, we consider this as a group. Julie then explores her anxiety about becoming overwhelmed by her emotions associated with this issue. I ask if she would like to get a sense of the anxiety in her body and she focuses for a while, noticing the sensations in her chest and whole body and keeping company with what is there. We move on when Julie is ready.

Rebecca explores her experiencing of a client who is working with a sexual issue, she notes her sense of his genuineness and this leads into a discussion about working with male clients who have sexual issues and our sense of safety as women counsellors.

During the session we also discuss a workshop about mistakes in counselling, focusing articles and counsellor Accreditation. We go with the flow, there is laughter and tears, we move in and out of Focusing. An exploration of client work moves into a supervisee's anxieties about being a 'crap counsellor'.

Julie says 'the whole session was down to the way it started'more free flowing' Rebecca speaks of the session being 'more open, more organic'. Next time she would like me to check whether any one has client work which they still need to bring half an hour before the end. Robyn says 'there was less content which is ok really because for me supervision should be more to look at what's going on for me about the client' and 'next time I'd like to try again'.

Subsequent Sessions

We continue in this less structured and more integrated way, no longer dividing the time between supervisees, just going with the flow.

I explain and demonstrate:

Presence language for example 'I'm sensing' can take us more into the body and the word 'something' which does not label or limit what we find.

Supporting the focuser with *reflections by* repeating what is said almost exactly or in essence.

Occasionally making *suggestions* to help the focuser stay in presence with whatever is presenting itself, to deepen contact with it and to find symbols that describe it.

I explain about the four stages of a Focusing session: *Coming In; Making Contact with something; Deepening Contact ; Coming Out* (McGavin. B, and Cornell. A. 2004).

There is some tension around managing the time available so that supervisees can bring clients as necessary and also look at Focusing theory and practice. Focusing itself is becoming more integrated within our supervisory explorations.

Robyn says 'hello' to an angry part and then notices a part that is ashamed of the anger. She senses into the angry part and associates it with a pain in her side. I suggest putting a gentle hand there. Now she is aware of 'just allowing the anger to be free, to be angry without feeling guilty'

Julie is aware of something 'floating around' she notices tension in her feet and her head bending. She does not know what this is about. I suggest keeping it company with interested curiosity and we wait. As she continues focusing Julie recognises a racial issue which she fears might get in the way of forming a relationship with her client. We explore this issue together as a group.

We discuss supervisee's dilemmas about which clients to bring to supervision. I suggest taking some time to get a sense of each client in their bodies and seeing what happens. Afterwards Robyn says 'I bring the person who I find the hardest to make contact with'. Rebecca compares one client to a bird with its mouth open 'feed me, feed me, I'll take anything'. Julie pictures a certain client in a boat, paddling away and coming back.

As the term draws to a close I sense an easiness and fluidity in our sessions. I step back a little to give supervisees more space and responsibility. As part of this we agree that supervisees will take responsibility for stating their needs, hoping that this will help us in managing our time.

I have an image of gentle waves falling into each other softly and becoming one, my breathing is calm and easy. The words peaceful, serene and still all fit.

The Third Term

This is our last term together. I am aware of the term having a certain feel to it and focus alone to get a deeper sense of this.

At first all I am aware of is 'there's something about this term' so I sit quietly, holding a space for something to surface. Eventually I notice a knotted sensation in my stomach. I picture a rope around my stomach being pulled at both ends and experience a tightening. I gently put my hand there which releases the tension a little. As I continue focusing I am in touch with my anxiety around 'how can we fit everything in?'

A Controlling Partial Self

We need to include end of year reviews in addition to our usual supervision. I suggest to the group that we work out the timing together. Then I write out a plan by myself.

I am sensing an impatient energy in my whole body and I am finding it difficult to sit still. Something in me really wants to get things sorted. I am very vaguely aware of some discomfort around what I am doing, but this does not stop me.

Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara Mc Gavin have identified 3 inner processes which they call partial selves. (Mc Gavin. B and Cornell A. 1994-2010). Partial Selves do not see the whole picture and they do not converse with each other.

At various times in our lives we are unable to deal with a situation internally and a stoppage occurs. Although the initial causes of the stoppage may now be forgotten, partial selves are still seeking inner resolution. Very basically:

Controlling Partial Selves are anxious they are trying to prevent something or perhaps everything from going wrong. They may try to control us by criticising or coaxing.

Compromised Partial Selves can feel young, wounded, vulnerable, afraid, useless and worthless. They may be aware of having missed out on something essential such as parental love. There is often a yearning to replace or to find what they have lost.

Defending Partial Selves are trying to 'maintain both the safety and integrity of the self' (Mc Gavin B and Cornell A. 1994-2010). They are impulsive and react quickly, without considering the consequences of their actions.

I am scribbling away when I notice that the room has become silent. Gradually I realise that I have been 'hijacked' by a Defending Partial-Self. As a result I have launched into action, organising our time myself instead of working collaboratively with supervisees. Furthermore I have become so intent upon making time for reviews that I have forgotten about their value for supervisees and supervisor.

So I pause and check in with supervisees about our arrangements. Later on in my own time I focus upon my sense of each supervisee and their qualities, before preparing what I would like to say to each person. Following group reviews I make a few amendments and eventually we all provide written reports for the college.

Towards an Ending

I give supervisees information about focusing websites and explain again about focusing partners. I invite supervisees to give Lead Ins to the group, providing opportunities for practice and feedback. All are nervous and then Julie finds the courage to try. Afterwards she responds to each person with reflections. A few weeks later Rebecca leads us in, her soothing tone of voice is appreciated by the group.

We continue focusing upon supervisory issues for example Robin focuses upon 'something uncomfortable in my stomach' relating this to a client with mental health issues. She gets a sense of the responsibility that she is experiencing 'to keep him afloat' and her sense of bearing this responsibility alone since the client will not see a doctor 'It's only me'. As a group we consider the client's needs, Robin's responsibilities as a counsellor and the pressure that she is experiencing.

Supervisees discuss and Focus upon their uncertainties, wishes and plans for the future. Julie senses 'something *around* my head'. She becomes aware of 'many areas of my life, all vying for attention' and 'all the chattering in my head'. In addition to considering Julie's situation we discuss that 'body' can refer to something outside of our physical selves, such as auras.

Gradually all supervisees decide that they are ready to leave the placement. There is sadness about leaving the college and the ending of our group, as well as appreciation for the counselling placement and the accepting environment that we have all created.

Robin speaks about how much she has valued the group and being able to talk about anything that is important. She says 'I would like to introduce focusing into my work'.

Julie talks about bringing focusing to a counselling peer group and says 'Focusing has really helped me to get in touch with what's going on. I am more in touch with the most important issues'.

Rebecca says 'I've been most aware of what focusing has brought to this group. Touching base with myself has helped me to be more available for others. I think that's why we've had those amazing discussions, reaching a deeper level.'

Reflections

My reflections are based upon personal experiencing, group discussions and Supervisee's comments and feedback. With their permission I am including material from our end of year reviews.

An Unstructured Approach

When deciding upon how to go about my project I became aware of something in me that wants to feel safe, it seeks structure and likes to follow a plan. There is also something in me that wants to feel free, it finds relying upon its sense of what is right in the moment liberating.

Being Self-in Presence allowed me to hear and to acknowledge both parts - the nervousness of the first and the impatience of the second. As time went on I sensed the first part relaxing and almost disappearing.

At the end of the first term, all supervisees expressed that they would like more Focusing. A Focusing session with my supervisor helped me to integrate more Focusing within our sessions. A structure had developed during the first term. I invited supervisees to discard it and then waited for something to happen. I experienced what occurred as spontaneous, natural and fresh.

This year we did things differently. Our way of working felt more organic. We were more experiential in our way of arriving to talk about our client work. The group felt comfortable and supportive. (Robyn) (Review).

Explanations and discussions about Focusing were an addition to our sessions. Throughout the year I experienced tension around reaching a suitable balance whereby supervisees would also have sufficient time for exploring their client work. At times supervisees expressed their concerns. Had we mapped out our time this might have been easier. During the Second term we agreed that supervisees would be responsible for stating their needs, for example saying 'I need time to discuss my work with.....today'. This seemed to be an improvement and was in tune with my collaborative approach to supervision.

Benefits of bringing Focusing to Supervision

I began my project with the hope that supervisees would find Focusing personally beneficial and that it would enhance our explorations of their work.

Supervisees' responses suggest that Lead Ins helped them to relax, to pause and to become aware of their inner experiencing.

A supervisee notices her awareness moving from feeling full in her stomach to heat in one hand. She becomes aware of this heat moving up her arm to her neck, over her head and down the other side of her body. She acknowledges that she would have missed this had she not been paying attention. (From my notes)

I have found that Paula's use of Focusing this year in supervision has been very useful. The lead in at the beginning of sessions has helped me to let go of other concerns and notice what is happening in my body. I think that this has helped our sessions to be more fluid and closer to the client's core concerns.(Julie) (Review).

At times a supervisee Focused upon a personal issue, something that was with them at the start of a session, or something that might affect their work. For example one supervisee Focused upon her sadness and anger relating to a friend's illness.

My own sense is that Focusing increased self awareness (congruence) and enabled a deeper level of exploration. Supervisee's comments support this:

I have found the supervision extremely helpful and the sessions have often resulted in a deeper level of work with my clients. (Rebecca) (Review).

It's not enough to just talk about clients. This puts me in touch with what's going on for me and why counselling sessions are going as they are (Robin) (Comment).

In addition to enhancing our explorations of their work Focusing has had an effect upon supervisees' practice. At various times each supervisee has spoken about bringing Focusing to their therapeutic work.

This year I have also taken advantage of my supervisor sharing her knowledge of Focusing with the group and I have learnt to be more confident about using this with my clients as a way of recognising the importance of body language and feelings located in the body. (Rebecca) (Review).

Areas for personal and professional development (supervisee review question)

I would like to look at Focusing and chilling (Robyn).

Concluding Remarks

I am glad that I had the idea of introducing Focusing into the supervision group. Overall I am very pleased with the impact that Focusing has had upon our supervisory explorations and upon our group process. From this experience something within me has shifted and my approach to supervising a group has become more open and less structured. Importantly my hopes and beliefs about the value of Focusing are strengthened.

I would like to thank Julie, Rebecca and Robin for joining me in this project. I very much appreciate your participation and feedback. I would also like to thank the

Counselling Service Managers for agreeing to my project and for giving me the freedom to carry it out in my own way.

Reference

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