

# Incorporating Focusing into the Naturopathic Medicine Encounter for Healing the Effects of Trauma

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In 1997 a groundbreaking study came out that demonstrated the relationship between traumatic stress in childhood and the leading causes of morbidity, mortality, and disability in the US: cardiovascular disease, chronic lung disease, chronic liver disease, depression, and other forms of mental illness, obesity, smoking, alcohol, and drug abuse. <sup>1</sup>

Over twenty years of medical research have shown that without adequate adult support, adverse childhood experiences change people in ways that can endure in their bodies for decades. It can change the experience of adaptive stress to toxic stress and lead to changes in brain development, chronic inflammation, hormonal changes.. <sup>1,2</sup>

Often as primary care doctors, we are the first or only person a patient comes into contact with for help with these chronic health conditions. Including approaches to address the long term effects of childhood trauma during our clinical encounters will help our patients physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

## Focusing

Focusing, a body-based practice developed by the late philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin Ph.D., offers us a way to help patients with a history of trauma and downregulate an overstimulated nervous system recover from habitual and addictive behaviors, and repair conditioned inter-relational reactions for a closer connection to others, all of which can support long-term health for years to come. <sup>3</sup>

Coming from the philosophical tradition of Dilthey, Dewey, and Merleau-Ponty, Gendlin developed a philosophy of the implicit and applied it to the work Carl Rogers was doing in the 1970s at the University of Chicago. <sup>4</sup> In his research, Gendlin discovered that the people who were more successful in changing their life situations naturally sensed inwardly and referred to their direct experience. Gendlin developed the process of Focusing as a specific way to teach people how to refer to their experience inwardly and come into relationship with what he called the *felt sense*. <sup>5</sup> By felt sense, he meant a bodily sensation that carried meaning. The more vague, unknown, and not so easy to describe, the more likely it could lead the Focuser freshly to a new experience.

Focusing typically begins by bringing our awareness into the body and the outer environment. Both Listener (practitioner) and Focuser (patient) slow down and take time to create a welcoming space for a felt sense around a particular issue or life situation to emerge within the Focuser. This all happens freshly in the present, yet also includes the past and the future, has embodied meaning, and is always part of a natural, regenerating, dynamic process.

In this article, I describe a few key components of Eugene Gendlin's philosophy and the process of Focusing that came out of his understanding of the body, trauma (stopped processes), and healing (carrying forward) and how these aspects relate to three foundational principles of

naturopathic medicine: 1) Doctor as teacher (Docere), 2) Treat the whole person (Tolle Totum), and 3) The healing power of nature (Vix Medicatrix Natura).<sup>6</sup> I will conclude with a clinical vignette that demonstrates how these principles can be included in a clinical encounter and be effective in preventing and treating the health consequences of childhood trauma.

### **Doctor as Teacher (Docere)**

The therapeutic potential of the doctor (teacher)- patient relationship cannot be overemphasized. It is one of the most necessary ingredients in revealing the unexpected and unpredictable steps toward healing. The connection between the two people provides a new way of relating that might not be available to our patients in their other relationships. When two people come together in presence and attuned connection with a shared intention to connect as fully as possible, that relational space gives birth to life-giving possibilities.

The core of Focusing is tending to the shared experience between two living beings. We bring acceptance, care, and patience to the relationship. Especially for our patients coming for help with health conditions associated with childhood trauma, needed support from adults likely was minimal or absent. They may not expect this to be any different as adults. As their physician, teacher, or just another human being, we can cultivate a healthy connection for a new experience of a healthy caring relationship. According to the research of Levine,<sup>7</sup> Porges<sup>8</sup>, and others, this particular quality of connectedness is necessary to heal and complete developmental and trauma-based life stoppages.

### **Treat the whole person (Tolle Totum)**

In *Nature Cure*, Lindlahr wrote, "Health is the normal and harmonious vibration of the elements and forces composing the human entity on the physical, mental, moral and spiritual planes of being, in conformity with the constructive principle of Nature applied to individual life."<sup>9</sup>

The harmonious functioning of all aspects of the person from a complex of physical, mental, emotional, genetic, environmental, social, and other factors are essential to health.

In the Process Model<sup>10</sup> the body is described as an ongoing interaction with, and inseparable from, the environment. In its formation from its very conception, the body is body-environment interaction. With this understanding, the body is more than a skin bag of biochemical and metabolic processes. The body always has and always will also include the environment and situations in which it lives.

"Everyone agrees that the body is made of environmental stuff, but it was assumed to be separate from the environment, merely perceiving and moving in it. But, if we consider the body's formation as a body process, then the body is environmental interaction from the start. The body is identical with its environment in one body-constituting process."<sup>11</sup>

By inviting the connection to the environment, its space/time movements and motions, other people, and nature, we help our patients have a direct experience of the larger whole living body that carries all of our life experiences and resources for carrying forward from stopped life

processes. Focusing opens our senses and welcomes the body's responses to the surroundings and our inner body's sensations. Edges and boundaries soften, the past and future are experienced in the present, and we are body-environment-interaction, receptive and open to the next steps toward healing.

### **The Healing Power of Nature (Vix Medicatrix Natura)**

Vix Medicatrix Natura is the inherent self-organizing and healing process of living systems that establishes, maintains, and restores health. It is not random but ordered and intelligent and exists in all processes of nature, including us. <sup>12</sup>

At the core of Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit is that the living body is always sensing and living its next bit of living. He calls this *bodily implying*. The whole body implies its implicit understanding of what is needed to carry forward its living in a situation. <sup>11</sup>

Gendlin states, "When something implied doesn't occur, the body continues to imply it. Until something meets that implication ('carries it forward'), the body continues to imply what was implied and didn't occur." <sup>11</sup>

An example is a female patient who regularly visited bars, would become intoxicated, and have multiple sexual encounters with men even though it brought feelings of anxiety, despair, and hopelessness. In the safety of my office and with my support guiding us in the Focusing process, she connected with the life energy of this behavior. She allowed the intensity of it to grow and change and then experienced something new in her body, power, and strength.

She then told me that she was repeatedly sexually abused by her stepfather. In retrospect, we can understand that when her growing feelings of strength and power stopped at a vulnerable age, her body, in its intelligence, found a way to imply it by drinking and picking up men at bars. Within our safe and close relationship, the body's implying led us to what needed to occur that did not in the past, and the outer behaviors were no longer needed. The excessive alcohol use and risky sexual encounters eventually stopped.

### **Clinical Vignette**

Debbie is a 34-year-old woman who describes her marriage as "one of necessity" and her two children as "little monsters that won't give me a break". She is overworked at her unfulfilling corporate job, but it provides her husband and children food and a roof over their heads, and it offers her a place to get away from them. When describing her family medical history, she says she raised herself. Both parents were alcoholics, her father died of pancreatic cancer at the age of 47, and she is estranged from her mother. She explains that she has been diagnosed with clinical depression and is looking for alternatives to anti-depressants.

I ask what depression feels like to her, and she slumps in her chair, sighs, and says, soooo low. I invite her to allow her body to show more of what it's like to be sooooo low (her bodily felt sense of depression). She leans over, wraps her hands around her head and says she feels so depressed like she is literally being pressed. She says she feels so heavy that she could sink into the ground. I take the blanket hanging off the arm of her chair and lay it on the ground. I ask if it would feel

right to let her body be pressed into the ground (following her body's intelligence/implying). She accepts the invitation and slides off her chair onto the blanket. I join her (we are in relationship, so we are in this together). She lays down and quietly weeps and, after some time, describes how dead she feels. After more time, she says, "I am in the dirt rotting." I reflect, "We are here in the cool dark earth's soil. See if it's ok to allow the rotting (welcoming the resources of the earth and the felt sense of rotting)." After some time, she describes the earth as comforting, like a grandmother (body-environment-interaction). She says she feels part of the cold darkness inside the lap of grandmother earth, where she can rest and *be* and not have to *do* anything (bodily felt shift).

After about a year of seeing each other twice monthly, Debbie left her job, became a massage therapist, built a studio in her back yard to do her painting, and was getting the resources needed to help her children with special needs. She and her husband are separated and in the process of getting a divorce that is mutually wanted.

### **Conclusion**

The body is a living, breathing organism that feels the pain of being wounded, and if we give it our awareness, it is our guide to healing. Knowing that the body carries the next steps needed for healing, our role is to support and encourage the process. We welcome the places in the body that want to come alive, even if it is to press us down into the earth to rot, and we trust this bodily wisdom knows things that we do not. We create a welcoming and trustworthy environment where healing unfolds without specifying *how* this healing needs to occur.

Naturopathic doctors recognize the healing process to be ordered and intelligent. We have therapies, substances, processes, and ourselves that support and facilitate this process. When practitioner and patient come together with the intention of the utmost healing, the relationship can accomplish more than each person alone. The relationship has unique potential and enhances both people by bringing out the individual's unique potential and purpose.

Focusing helps patients share *from* their experiences rather than share *about* their experiences and can be immediately helpful in bringing a bodily felt shift, a change in their lived experience. These bodily felt shifts can occur within the first visit with their practitioner and are likely to continue throughout their healing process as the vital force continually and intelligently pushes toward growth.

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## Bio

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