

WORKING WITH THE “FELT SENSE”

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I recently had an experience where I found myself feeling completely out of sorts (anxious to the point of panicky, then nearly paralyzed with depression) for no apparent reason. Try as I might to figure out what was bothering me, I couldn't put my finger on it, and the usual strategies for changing my mood weren't working. Finally, I was able to identify the feelings and their source, using a method described by Eugene Gendlin in his book “Focusing” (first published in 1978).

And it worked! Once I was able to get in touch with the essence of what was bothering me, or the “felt sense” as Gendlin calls it, and put it into words, then I could see how a current situation had triggered deep and painful feelings (of being powerless over decisions that were being made that affected me, as well as not having my needs or point of view heard) just like I had often experienced as a child. And then I felt something shift, my mood lifted and I felt OK again, even though nothing had actually changed in terms of the outward reality of my circumstances.

This is what I tell my clients: if your emotional reaction seems extreme, all out of proportion to the current circumstances in your life, then you need to listen to what your body is trying to tell you. Here's a brief description of the “felt sense” from the Focusing Institute's website: *“You have a bodily orienting sense. You know who you are and how you come to be reading this page. To know this you don't need to think. The knowing is physically sensed in your body and can easily be found. But this bodily knowing can extend much more deeply. You can learn how to let a deeper bodily felt sense come in relation to any problem or situation. Your body “knows” the whole of each of your situations, vastly more aspects of it than you can enumerate separately.”* (www.focusing.org)

If that sounds a little too “touchy-feely” to you, keep in mind that recent research in neurobiology (see “Social Intelligence” by Daniel Goleman) has revealed that our feelings come from a more instinctive, primitive area of the brain than our thoughts. It's also been discovered, through brain and body imaging technology, that emotions exist in other parts of the body besides the brain, specifically around the organs in our midsection (heart, stomach, intestines). Turns out “gut feelings” are real! And sometimes just getting in touch with that inner awareness can bring relief.

It may be that a present situation has evoked strong feelings from the past, from an earlier traumatic or distressing time in your life. Sometimes those feelings may date to a time far back in your childhood, a time when you may not have understood what was happening, and didn't have the words to express your feelings or the ability to speak up for your own interests. Even common events like having minor surgery, witnessing an argument between adults, or getting lost, can be traumatic for a child. Those “feeling memories” live on in the body, and can continue to affect you, even though you may not be aware of them or have never put them into words.

You may not need years of therapy to get in touch with these feelings. An excellent introduction to the felt sense and how to use focusing is “The Power of Focusing” by Ann Weiser Cornell (available through her website: www.focusingresources.com). If you'd like to explore focusing or other types of mind-body practices to help get in touch with your inner self, contact me: