**Solo Focusing**

**by Kay Hoffmann**

“I’ve given up trying to focus alone because I never get anywhere”; “I can’t stay with the process when I’m on my own”; “I need the presence of another person for something to shift.” All these comments were made by experienced Focusers. So why is solo Focusing so much harder for most people than Focusing with a companion? And can anyone learn to focus effectively on their own? In the hope of finding answers to these questions I quizzed 15 focusers about their own experiences. All of them were familiar with the various helpful tips available and yet the majority of them found Focusing alone difficult. Just two said their solo Focusing was as valuable as Focusing with a partner.

Why People Find Solo Focusing Difficult

The main reasons for solo Focusing being unsatisfactory, as stated by the Focusers themselves, were:

“My mind wanders”. “I find it difficult to concentrate and keep drifting off on daydreams.” (In this case whatever the Focuser is thinking about, he labels it “drifting” or “wandering” )

“As soon as I sit down to Focus I start to think I haven’t really got time for it.” “I keep getting distracted by thinking of all the other things I need to do.”

“It goes OK up to a point but then I just get a foggy stuckness.” (A range of similar reports included “fuzziness” and “getting lost”.)

“When I go inside there’s nothing there”.

“I can always find a felt sense but I can’t get it to shift.”

“I sit down to start Focusing but then I get scared that if I go too deeply into something I’ll be overwhelmed.”

These obstacles have two things in common: they happen after the Focuser has begun to direct their attention inside; and they are either easily surmountable or not evident at all in the presence of a companion. This suggests that although the Focuser may perceive them as obstacles to the process getting underway, each one is actually “a something” which could be given attention within a process which is already underway. To use the second quote as an example: there is a difference between not planning to focus at all due to a genuine lack of time, and deciding to focus, sitting down to begin, and then thinking “I haven’t got time for this.”

So the main pitfall of Focusing alone could be missing the obvious – that which is directly under our noses. Why does the Focuser not say to themself: “I’m noticing something in me which feels I haven’t got time for this”? Likewise, what prevents the “easily overwhelmed” Focuser from acknowledging their fear by saying “something in me is scared I’ll be overwhelmed”? Clearly, in each case, the Focuser is merged with something – yet even when my interviewees were reporting their difficulties, this possibility did not always occur to them – and I am certain that all of the Focusers in question would immediately spot such an instance of merging if they were in the companion’s seat! It seems that there is a particularly subtle dynamic in place here which can hide the obvious from us when we are Focusing alone.

Most of the Focusers I spoke to reported that if they do get past the point of settling down with a felt sense and it begins to make steps, the session usually runs smoothly thereafter. The main danger area, then, is at the very beginning of a session when self-listening skills are not yet consciously engaged – the transition zone between usual thinking patterns and Focusing.

Let's borrow Ann's analogy of arranging to meet a good friend in a cafe. Say friend A has the intention of finding out how friend B is really feeling. Imagine she says "So how are things with you today?" and friend B replies: "I really haven't got time for this now because there's still so much I need to do today" or "I'd rather not talk just now because if I do I know I'll get really upset" or "Everything's just fine – nothing really to report at all at the moment".

If friend A were to follow up with a comment such as: "What's wrong with you? You always come up with the same pathetic excuse for not talking to me" or "Well if you're going to be like that, I'm off!", she would be responding in a similar way to how Focusers sometimes respond to parts of themselves. No wonder such parts react by digging in their heels! Obviously, these would be examples of not listening from Presence – obvious at least if a Focusing partner were to make such a response out loud, but much less easy to spot in our own ambient thoughts.

So why are these thoughts that come up at the point of entry into a Focusing session so particularly hard to identify as 'parts'? One reason – substantiated by the observation that most of us seem to have one particular recurring 'obstacle' – is that the more habitual it becomes, the more invisible it becomes. For instance if someone has an experience of "drifting off into thoughts" the first few times they attempt Focusing alone, they soon begin to carry this information with them as a fact : "When I try to Focus alone I just drift off". It follows that they are likely to become so merged with this negative expectation that it is impossible to recognize it as something which could be acknowledged: "Something in me is wanting to drift off." Another possibility is that our recurring difficulties with Focusing alone are the equivalent of our habitual forms of process-skipping – the mechanisms we tend to use to avoid staying at an edge where change can happen. In this case we would already be oblivious to our use of a particular avoidance strategy and if this were adapted as a means of avoiding an edge in Focusing we would be less likely to recognize it. McMahon and Campbell write: "My defences against such bodily-felt, authentic contact are strong, automatic, process-skipping and invisible – at least to myself." (Bio-Spirituality Newsletter, Winter 1998 )

## Why Focus Alone?

Given the difficulties of solo Focusing, can anything be said in favour of persevering with it? Are there any benefits of Focusing alone which cannot be accessed by Focusing with a companion? In an article on Focusing alone Dorothy Fisch says: “Focusing ‘alone’ is when I feel most connected with the oneness of life… I valued partner-Focusing, but it led me to different places.” (TFC, Nov. 1992) Another experienced Focuser says: “My solo Focusing is the core of my Focusing practice.” Others give various reasons why Focusing alone is sometimes preferable to Focusing with a partner. These include Focusing on issues which are of a private or sensitive nature, occasions when something needs immediate attention and no listener is available, and times when the Focuser would feel inhibited by the presence of a listener.

There are also times when something needs much more time than would be practical for a listener to give and often just “keeping company” while it slowly unfolds. Dorothy describes her experience of this beautifully: “Solitary Focusing…is like watching an oak leaf unfurl. It happens very slowly. First you notice a nub, then a few days later a leaf bud, days after that the unfurling starts to happen and you have a leaf.”

The term “Focusing alone” is generally used to denote a formal type of Focusing session – a “sitting down to it”, however, another form of solo Focusing is that which could be said to be the long-term aim of all Focusers: to be lightly aware of the felt sense of the moment at all times. Touching base with the felt sense briefly throughout the day is an especially valuable practice which helps to soften the boundary between “outside” and “inside”. It leads to a sense of being more consistently in touch with oneself and more authentic in interactions with others.

Focusing alone also provides a unique opportunity to acknowledge parts which tend to be "off-stage" when a companion is present. In my determination to undertake regular solo sessions whilst working on this project, I found myself acknowledging a part with which I had hitherto been merged. Finally settling down with this part developed into a bizarre though very valuable session during which I made the following notes. The transcript begins after I suddenly realized I'd spent five minutes just thinking about whether I ought to be doing something else instead of Focusing. (Qualities of felt senses are described in brackets; words I 'hear' from a felt sense are in italics; my own "listening-me" responses are in inverted commas; …. = silences /taking time to acknowledge something).

"I'm sensing something which is saying it's really important for me to think about whether I ought to be doing something else just now"…. (Ache across torso) ….

I really hate it when you feel unsure about what you want to do ….. I don't want you to waste time struggling over what to do. I hate it when you feel tense and scattered and unsure ….. I can see there's lots to do and I don't know what's most important …. I want you to be focused and in the moment – in flow. ….

(Tense, desperate pushing under diaphragm) ….

There's so much to do and not much time …. get ON with something – ANYthing – then I can relax …..

"Ah, what you really want is to be able to relax" …..

Yes… like when you're Focusing with someone else….

"Like when I'm focusing with someone else – then you can relax"..

Yes.. And I know Focusing is good for you and well worth the time but like this I really struggle with feeling perhaps you ought to be doing something else ……. actually I'm here nearly all the time like this but you don't notice me. ….

(Ache elongating – exhausted, strung out, stretched thin) ….. “I’m going to just stay here and keep you company”…..

Do you really want to spend time being with me when you’re so busy?

(Weak, tired, surprised) ….”Yes”…. (ache released, spreading warmth)

I stayed with the pleasant warmth, enjoying feeling relaxed and centred for some time before finishing. This ten minute session proved to be a valuable step for me. Since then I have been able to keep this part company “on the hoof” when it is around, enabling it to gradually shift in a life-forward direction. It has also made me aware of just how much this one part has influenced the way I perceive my use of time – and taken a lot of tension out of that whole area of my life. As I have never encountered this part in my partner Focusing, it demonstrates that solo Focusing can provide a unique opportunity to come into relationship with such habitual process-skipping strategies.

So having convinced myself that there is enough to be said in favour of solo Focusing to make it worth persevering with – indeed to make it highly recommendable – I decided to try to shed more light on the problems encountered in Focusing alone by looking at when they tend not to present themselves:

## When Focusing Goes Well and What Facilitates the Process

The vast majority of the people I spoke to said their Focusing usually goes well a) when alone if a pressing issue is clamouring for their attention and b) when Focusing with a partner.

a) “If I’ve got something worrying me I can usually focus on it alone.” Several people said that although they don’t focus regularly alone – due to one of the problems previously mentioned – they do use Focusing to address pressing issues and/or strong emotional reactions as they come up. When something is already physically felt or when strong feelings facilitate rapid access to the felt sense, obstacles are less likely to be encountered. The danger area has been bypassed. Not only are we already engaged in the Focusing process by the act of noticing the felt sense, but we also have a set purpose for the session – we have something in obvious need of attention and are motivated to spend some time with it. Some degree of Presence is automatically established in the act of identifying something inside as separate from “me” and being interested in finding out more about it. Therefore having the idea of Focusing on a currently felt issue is in itself an indication of an intention and capacity to be with something rather than be merged with it.

b) In a prearranged session with a companion there is often no such burning issue present. The intention is to simply check in with ourselves and see what, if anything, wants our attention – just as in an equivalent solo Focusing session. And yet the vast majority of Focusers report rarely, if ever, encountering their usual obstacles when Focusing with a companion. Why not?

Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara McGavin write: “There are three qualities which a partner brings which need to be brought into Focusing alone, often consciously and deliberately: 1) containment (being held), 2) concentration (the opposite of spacing out, wandering, etc., 3) non-judgment.” (early draft of Focusing Student’s and Companion’s Manual)

On sensing that a companion has these qualities and is thereby supporting Presence, it becomes possible to stay at an edge of experiencing where one may otherwise not feel safe to go. Ed McMahon and Peter Campbell put it this way: “So the companion is there to support the Focuser in finding his own innate ability to keep himself company in a gentle, caring way. If a

person has lost this ability and/or developed a strong habit of disconnecting from the felt sense, he will be unable to Focus alone." ("Bio-Spirituality")

So we are not speaking here of a simple application of technical skills, but of having the capacity to provide the kind of Presence which allows our own self-process to unfold. Gene Gendlin explains why the first step towards developing this capacity is to Focus with a listener: "To be myself I need your responses, to the extent to which my own responses fail to carry my feelings forward. At first, in these respects, I am 'really myself' only when I am with you.. The continued carrying forward into ongoing interaction process is necessary in order to reconstitute experiencing long enough for the individual himself to obtain the ability to carry it forward as self-process."("A Theory of Personality Change")

Can Solo Focusing Be Learned?

Gendlin's words prompt a question: Can solo Focusing be learned at any stage or must a certain capacity to listen to ourselves be developed before we are able to begin to focus alone? In other words, is it always possible for a Focuser to provide the qualities of Presence necessary to support their own process?

Most Focusers need very little from a companion to support their process. In fact, as I discovered by accident, often literally nothing apart from simply being there (even on the other end of a phone) is needed to generate an atmosphere of "containment, concentration and non-judgment." Naively attempting to simulate solo Focusing as closely as possible to observe the process, I listened silently to several sessions and found that the effect of the experiment itself defeated my object! People who when alone had difficulties in beginning a session, settling down with something, staying with the process or experiencing a shift, had no problems whatsoever when I was simply 'listening in'. It seems that although a companion's

reflections and suggestions may provide a very useful and welcome aid to Focusing, it is the overall effect of having someone there which facilitates the Focusing process. Hence many Focusers are pessimistic about their abilities to focus alone because in partner Focusing they perceive the companion to be “holding Presence” for them. It makes a subtle but important difference to consider that successful Focusing can only occur when the Focuser is also listening to himself from a place of Presence. In this sense it could be said that even when a companion is present, the Focuser is still Focusing alone! Whatever level of support the companion is providing, he is still not ‘doing’ the Focusing himself. Would it follow then that anyone who is able to focus successfully with a companion is also able to focus alone?

Technically it might appear so, but there are occasions when solo Focusing is – by definition – just not able to fit the bill. One Focuser says this beautifully: “Sometimes the words need to come out of my system and be met by another human being.” I strongly feel that no efforts to support solo-focusing should attempt to minimise this very real and healthy desire for human contact when it arises.

With the exception of such specific requirements for a listener, it appears likely (to me) that in most cases Focusers do have the capacity to provide themselves with the necessary qualities to support Presence. Therefore I propose that problems can be traced back to just three specific areas of merging:

the Focuser does not succeed in establishing Presence at the beginning of the session. This makes the likelihood of merging with whatever comes up almost inevitable.

at the point at which something begins to make steps, a “critical part” throws doubt on the Focuser’s ability to focus alone and the Focuser becomes (and remains) merged with that part.

a “controlling part” is present which feels a sense of responsibility for directing the session. It may feel that it has to initiate something which will make the process flow faster or make a shift occur or that it has to do something to “fix” something. This area is a quagmire if the Focuser becomes merged with it – and the risk is high because there is, of course, some truth in the idea that “I” am responsible for directing the session. As much emphasis is placed on the role of the companion in Focusing and students learn many subtleties of listening responses, it is not surprising that many feel daunted by the prospect of “doing both jobs” in solo Focusing.

It seems that many of us assume we know the “ground-rules” of Focusing so well that when we sit down to focus alone we comply with them automatically, and yet according to my findings, it is not unusual for experienced Focusers to either “forget” the basics – or believe that they can dispense with them. Consequently all the effort we put into learning to cultivate Presence as a companion goes out of the window when we focus alone! There is a notion that to simply pause and look inside denotes the beginning of a solo Focusing session – and indeed it does on the condition that we have a respectful, compassionate, non-judgmental attitude towards whatever we might find there. If not, then we will become merged with our ambient thoughts rather than be in a position to say hello to them.

## Taking it forward

What then can we do to avoid becoming merged with ambient thoughts? I feel the answer lies in going back to the basics – reminding ourselves that moving into Presence does not always happen automatically and that normally we have to do something to encourage it to happen. And remembering, above all, that any attitude other than one of respectful, compassionate, non-judgmental attention denotes a merging with another part.

So before coming up with any new suggestions on how to alleviate the problems of solo Focusing, I first came to a point of realizing just how good all the old ones are! Almost every article and chapter on Focusing alone includes a list of suggestions on how to stay in Presence,

from “Conjure up the person you would most like to listen to you, then have them respond in exactly the way you want” (Diana Marder, TFC, Nov. 1992), to “Write down key words like the description, the questions you’re asking, and whatever else feels important” (Cornell, “The Power of Focusing”) and “Speak into a cassette recorder and play it back if you get stuck or lost” – and there are, of course, many others.

Finding some means of consciously becoming one’s own listener seems to be essential. This means having a concept of “listening-me” which feels bigger than all the rest of me – whether one imagines it to be another person, a computer, a teddy bear or oneself. During the session I transcribed, I was writing down not only the significant words that came from the felt sense but also my own listening responses. Having a very clear sense of “listening-me” was what enabled me to come into relationship with a hitherto hidden part.

I have noticed that doubts around self-guiding skills and impatience when something doesn’t shift appear to diminish with experience. People who have been Focusing the longest are generally much more content to just keep something company – for a long time if necessary – trusting that a shift will occur if and when it is ready. In his book “Focusing”, Gendlin writes: “If the felt sense does not shift and answer right away, that is all right. Spend a minute or so with it. We do not control a shift when it comes. What is crucial is the time you spend sensing it. If you spend time sensing something unclear that is right there ..then you are Focusing.”

So although we are responsible for maintaining Presence, we are not responsible for directing the process itself. To remember this during each session could take a considerable amount of unnecessary stress out of solo Focusing.

It might also be helpful to let go of expectations that solo Focusing should feel the same as Focusing with a companion but to increase the value we place on it in terms of developing the habit of being in touch with our moment to moment authentic experiencing. Seeing solo-Focusing as a step on the way to cultivating Presence in our lives in general rather than as an end in itself could significantly ease some of the difficulties it presents. Focusers are less likely to encounter problems when "checking in" with the felt sense briefly throughout the day. If all else fails it might be advisable for a struggling solo Focuser to take a break from formal sessions and simply enjoy sensing inside at times when they are feeling good.

Finally, a quote from Neil Friedman strikes me as particularly relevant to solo-Focusing: "Focusing is relaxing. It feels good in the body." ("Focusing: Selected Essays") It follows that if it starts to feel unpleasantly scary, sad, frustrating, empty, lonely, or whatever, we can assume we are merged with something. So I would like to offer just one fundamental tip: If it doesn't feel good – step back and acknowledge it from a place which feels safe and comfortable. This will take you to what is "right on top" in your experiencing – the outermost edge of that which is needing attention – and to be with that will always bring a sense of rightness and relief.

Since accepting that by following this one guideline we can consistently spend time with something in our authentic experiencing in a caring way, I have tentatively come to the feel that – yes, with sufficient support, anyone can learn to focus alone.