

Recognizing Felt Shifts as Change Steps

by Glenn Fleisch

Book: *The Experiential Dimension in Psychotherapy* by Kathleen N. McGuire (1984), \$29.95. Video: The Heart of Health, Vol.12, "Focusing Awareness," with K. McGuire (1995), \$29.95.

Prior to the publication of Gendlin's new book (*Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy*, reviewed in TFC September 1996), Kathy McGuire had written a manuscript on the bodily, experiential dimension in psychotherapy and on how to operate experientially in psychotherapy. Her book, *The Experiential Dimension in Psychotherapy*, is an important contribution to the theory, practice, and research of Focusing in an experiential psychotherapy. The main value of her book is the clear articulation and many examples of the interaction between felt experiencing and symbolizations in therapy, and how this interaction leads to personality change and positive outcome in therapy.

The main theme and purpose of the book is the recognition and facilitation of "direct reference" to felt experiencing; that is, those moments when clients are in direct touch with a bodily felt sentience that underlies their symbols (verbalizations, emotions, behaviors, cognitions). The second interrelated theme is the understanding and enhancement of experiential change, what we call the "felt shift," in sessions.

McGuire's use of her own experiences with clients and the occurrence of felt shifts with her clients are a highlight of this book. The occurrence or absence of felt shifts in sessions should be the therapist's guide as to the effectiveness of interventions. McGuire also describes her own felt experience of change *as a therapist* -- a bodily sense of release, relaxation, openness, easing, or its absence as a continued tension. As a practicing therapist, I have found this extremely useful.

This book brings alive some of the basic concepts and principles of Focusing therapy. The use of extended full session transcripts puts the reader inside the "action" where you can observe and experience what actually happens in experiential Focusing-oriented therapy sessions. The interactions between symbolization and felt experiencing are demonstrated. She discloses exact instances when the client is making "direct reference" to present felt experiencing and shows how the therapist does (or does not) facilitate these moments of client "Focusing." Her use of the Experiencing Scale (EXP) and commentary reveal the ongoing experiential process in therapy.

The section on "Researching the Experiential Dimension" is my favorite. It includes a description of the Experiencing Scale (EXP) and its use in measuring clinically meaningful levels of psychotherapy process and testing the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions. Commentary and charts from her two transcripts demonstrate how to do research into the experiential dimension. McGuire encourages therapists to do research with their own clients in similar ways, such as when specific client behaviors evoke

specific therapist interventions {such as Focusing suggestions} which result in a certain therapeutic outcome.

This is an application of Elliot, Rice, and Greenberg's "task analysis" and "change events" approach to Focusing events, now a recognized paradigm for doing psychotherapy process research. I have been very influenced by this work and am now developing just such a research project. McGuire has been leading the way in calling for research, especially in this era of managed care and brief therapy.

The videotape "*Focusing Awareness*" carries forward her work and is very useful adjunct to her book. It consists of two 30-minute interviews from a TV show on mind-body health. The interviewer allowed McGuire to expound on basic Focusing principles such as the process of checking with the body in therapy--"Can you stop and just check what is going on inside, in your body, now?"--and to discuss ways to introduce and use Focusing in psychotherapy.

The clear, well-presented discussion includes references to using Focusing for stress reduction, illness, problem solving, and special issues with male clients, couples, and children. The mind-body connection is emphasized, how bodily healing and change evolves through Focusing.

Most impressive on this video is a brief (10-12 minute) Focusing demonstration with a client. This client came in with a severe migraine headache, and by the end of the session describes how she feels a release of pressure in her head. The session clearly illustrates a significant change "marker," and the emergence of a "felt shift." The focuser is describing her experience of carrying around a "heavy weight" when suddenly she says, "I want to just lift it off and put it down... I don't want to carry this weight around... It's been so long!... I'm really tired of carrying it... Why can't I just put it down and walk lightly, just skip? ...I want to be able to function in the world."

This "marker," the emergence of a desire, want, need, is a beginning step of change. I was impressed by McGuire's careful empathic reflections of the focuser's feelings and felt meanings, and her encouragement of the Focusing attitude. The camera work is superb, showing close-ups of the focuser's face and upper body. Physical signs of a felt shift, such as tears, changes in tension, fluttering of the eyes, quivering of the neck, and breathing patterns, are clearly visible. What a beautiful moment to capture!--a change step, bodily healing and life- forward movement!

I highly recommend both the book and the video to use for training, presentations, and research, and to anyone interested in learning more about the experiential aspects of therapy. Available at www.cefocusing.com.

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