

Focusing-oriented therapy with disconnected process

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I. What is disconnected process?

Disconnected process refers to a structure-bound state of blockage in which at least one or more aspects of oneself are kept out of awareness. Most often, there is a pronounced difficulty in recognizing and relating with the felt quality of experiencing, at times manifest as a distancing from immediate feelings and bodily sensations. In one sense, most everyone manifests some level of disconnection, even when we say “Fine,” to the question of “How are you doing today?” when there is clearly more happening inwardly that is either not experienced or not verbalized. At more severe levels, there can be a chronic lack of awareness of what one is experiencing or feeling, to the point of not recognizing emotional or physical reactions. Sometimes, certain parts of experiencing are kept out of awareness as when there is an unconscious, automatic pattern of blocking out aggressive, sexual or anxious feelings. When extreme, people may not be aware of any feeling or sensory experiencing, and when their consciousness can detach from bodily reactions so that there is a reporting of being “numb” or “blank” or “feeling nothing”, or, at its most extreme, “deadness.” The basic pattern involves some type of splitting of awareness: between the person and the body, or parts of the body, or some aspects of experiencing, or between ‘parts’ of the personality.

Another prominent feature of disconnected process is that of “hypoarousal,” in which the body’s nervous system shuts down, often with sleepiness, fogging/spacing out, deadening, numbing, becoming distracted, feeling weak, muscles are placid, etc. At other times, the body posture becomes rigid, tight, with a sense of being “on-guard,” in a state of readiness, alertness, tension, readiness, etc., although often without fully experiencing the extent of the physical constriction. This latter aspect of disconnection can lead to a chronic state of “immobility” or “freezing,” in which the body is poised to do or express something that is at the same time prevented from happening. What results from this lack of awareness and lack of discharge or expression of feeling and energy is a build-up of

pressure in the person's whole embodied system. At times, the build-up becomes too intense, and there may be episodes of (sometimes dissociated) rage & aggressive/violent behavior, acting out of addictions, or self-inflicted physical pain.

I think that disconnected process is one of the organism's inherent survival mechanisms in the face of life events that threatened survival and/or integrity of the self, especially aggression and violence including physical and sexual abuse. Thus, the person's suffering and inward pain as well as nervous stress and tension are mostly kept out of awareness. In fact, the pattern of disconnecting is often activated when the body's nervous stress system starts to react to an internal or external event with agitation, anxiety or shame. There is a sense then of freezing, going blank, shutting down, although the body itself is often operating with a great deal of internal pressure and stress. We can speculate that the body shuts down in an effort to keep itself from awareness of this pressurized system as well as to maintain some capacity to function in everyday life.

II. Focusing-oriented approach to working with disconnected process

The essence of a Focusing-oriented approach in therapy is to enable clients to *engage-with* and *relate to* what they are experiencing moment-to-moment in sessions. The term "experiencing" refers to "what you can sense in your body right now" (Hendricks, 2001), or perhaps in a broader way, experiencing encompasses a *felt quality* of whatever emerges into awareness at any moment. The human organism is a system of activity or interaction that includes both its environment and the physical body as *one event*. Thus, the body's inward feeling implicitly discloses information and meaning about oneself and the situation it finds itself in. The main function of FOT is to facilitate an interaction and process in which therapist and client are interacting with and relating to immediate felt experiencing in sessions. When clients are following their experiential track, then our task is simply to accompany and support clients in staying in Presence with their bodily experiential process. When clients are not following their experiential track, either by becoming caught up in their feelings and nervous system energy (being overwhelmed) or

by staying detached from their body and immediate flow of feelings, then our task is to facilitate ways to help clients reengage with what they are experiencing and doing.

One of the most challenging situations for a Focusing-oriented therapist occurs when clients manifest chronic patterns of disconnecting or dissociating awareness from their body and experiencing. It is often difficult to help clients to *want to* move *closer* to their felt experiencing, when their instinctive, automatic reaction is to keep awareness away from the present moment and from bodily felt experiencing.

When the needed interactions are missing or lacking, the body process continues to imply what is needed for carrying forward the person's living. In disconnected process, the stoppage of life-forward energy is often quite profound, so that much of the life-energy and positive Presence must come from the therapist. If we follow the standard Focusing protocol of waiting for something to come from the client's experiential process, then therapy often lapses into an impasse, with little or no forward movement happening.

The basic principles of Focusing-oriented that I would like to demonstrate include: 1) function of therapist's Presence and relational contact; 2) importance of offering gentle invitations, with no pressure or expectation to change; 3) always acknowledging and affirming what client IS noticing and doing; 4) Focusing is done by the therapist to sense for feelings and for any edge of emerging life energy and aliveness; 5) accepting and respecting ALL parts of the self, including patterns of not-feeling as having positive functions; and 6) offering suggestions for activities, including standing, grounding, movement that can activate and strengthen WB Presence and life-forward steps.

III. Examples of Focusing-oriented therapy with disconnected process

It is difficult to convey in a brief paper the intricacies in working with clients who manifest different aspects of disconnected process. Therapy is usually long-term, with the therapist needing to show extreme patience and acceptance that it often takes long periods of time for even the smallest amount of change and forward movement to occur. In fact, I have found that it is crucial that there be no pressure at all to change or be different, as often (as mentioned in a previous section), clients' system is already highly pressurized. This sense of pressure can come both from within and from others. From within, there is often a part of the self that tries to "push" for change and/or is critical of how the shut-down part of the self operates. From others, there can be pressure to change as when a spouse becomes frustrated by the client's lack of affect and genuine expression of feelings, or by disconnected episodes of acting-out, etc. Thus, my initial intention in working with clients is to *make contact* and stay in *felt connection* with the person in there and what s/he is up against. The whole meaning of "resistance" is transformed from something "negative" to something that itself has implicit life-forward energy. For example, we can demonstrate how to check inwardly for felt rightness of anything said or done, and encourage the saying of "No" to any invitation or suggestion. If then the client does check and say "No," then this is no longer a resistance but is actually a positive affirmation that there is a bodily sensed knowing in there that one can begin to trust.

Example #1: I have been working with a client for about a year who experienced severe developmental traumas, including parental abandonment, family rejection, and emotional and sexual abuse. He manifests chronic and severe levels of disconnection from his body, from other people, from his inner feeling life and from his physical surroundings. In sessions, he rarely makes direct contact with me, often with his head continually moving from side to side and his eyes wandering around the room. He has been open to Wholebody Focusing, including standing and grounding, which he says does engender more capacity for staying in Presence and for calming his mind and nervous tension. This is from a recent session where for one of the first times, the client stated that he had sensed a feeling during the week.

C: I did become aware of something this week- my wife and I tend to irritate each other.

T: So you have noticed that there is something here, something about your interaction with your wife that feels irritating. Let's take some time to stay with that awareness....

C: (period of silence) Yeah, I don't know what it is but I do think that we push each other's buttons....

T: Something about pushing each other's buttons- perhaps we could sense what it is you might be doing that your wife finds irritating...

C: I know she doesn't like it when I poke fun or make jokes- she finds it annoying...

T: Yeah, you are aware that something in her feels annoyed, and yet, I have liked that side of you that does have a good sense of humor, very wry, funny. I wonder if you might appreciate that aspect of yourself- give that some time to maybe just be-with it...

C: OK (silence). Yeah, I am remembering that as a kid, I used to be sort of like a class clown, a prankster, and would often get in trouble in school for that. (Smiles)

T: Something about recognizing this "prankster" as a kid makes you smile...

C: (Continuing to smile) You know, there was a lot of vitality in that kid- he had a lot of energy and spunk...

T: Yeah, I can sense that myself, and wonder if we might take some time to welcome that awareness of vitality...

C: (after a short while) I can see how something happened that shut-down all that energy and vitality. Even right now, something about that makes me nervous (shoulders, arms

and hands start to shake a little). It feels like I want to shut that off, feels uncomfortable, like I want to get rid of that (hands are pushing in a downward motion).

T: Ok- let's really slow down here and give what is happening all the space and time that it needs. This feels really important- so let's welcome both of these places in you, and that you became aware of them. There is a vitality there, life energy that came out as a kid through playful pranks and clowning, and some other pattern there that learned to shut-down that part of you for good reason. I imagine that this part of you has not been so well received, even has created problems, so no wonder something in you gets frightened and wants to shut that off. Yet that vitality and aliveness is still there, maybe it has been preserved all these years, waiting to be welcomed and accepted...

C: As you say that, it actually makes a lot of sense to me (big smile). It feels like my whole body calmed and it feels a little less scary to recognize that vitality. Still very uncomfortable though.

T: Sure, as this is a new possibility that your process is showing us. So perhaps it is something you can just sense in yourself right now and no need to do anything different.

Example #2: Being in WB Presence is absolutely essential in working with disconnected process. Even if the client is not in a state of Presence, the therapist's Presence can somatically and experientially resonate with felt signals of what might be happening in the relational field. WB Presence allows me to stay in felt contact with the person and functions like a tuning fork or channel to sense even subtle energies and feelings, including what the process might be implying and needing right now. Given that clients are often not aware of what they are doing or experiencing, our Presence can observe and feedback what is happening, and can offer a possibility of sensing something new and alive unfolding.

One client tends to have a difficult time staying in the present moment. Almost everything she says is stated in the past or future tense, very rarely as something she is experiencing right now. Mostly, she tells stories of what happened to her during the past week, either at work or in her primary relationship. When she does, often her body starts to manifest the reaction that might have occurred at the time, but she is usually not able to recognize or acknowledge that this is happening. By allowing this to just be as it is, without trying to change her into present time awareness, something in her seems to feel safe to actually allow more of her process to open and unfold. It also allows me to observe and somatically resonate both what she might be feeling and how parts of her operate, including what might be trying to unfold but is prevented. One time recently, something in me felt it was the right time to bring this pattern to awareness.

T: I notice that whenever we try to stay connected with the present moment, something in you always seems to state it as the past or something you will do. First, that is perfectly ok, and yet something in me wonders what it is that keeps you from staying aware of the present and connecting with your body and feelings.

C: (Stops- eyes well up with tears) I know what it is. It feels like if I stop, then I have to face all this pain and hurt inside me, and it feels very terrifying to do so. That's why I hate to cry- because it feels like if I start, it will never stop. So I guess I am always telling stories so it distracts some what I carry around inside. I know I need to stop, and rest, but it is so hard to do.

T: Yes, stopping and connecting with yourself from inside, feels very scary, because you just became aware of all the feelings your body carries. Most of you does not want to do that, and nothing from me will ever press in any way for that to happen. Also, know that nothing here happens without your permission or consent, so that you can always stop anything from happening if it doesn't feel ok. That feels especially important as that pattern of keeping attention away from the present and from feelings has been protecting sensitive and vulnerable places in you, especially when it wasn't safe to show feelings. I

wonder if we can appreciate the step that just happened, of how you were able to stop and let me know what you were experiencing. I wonder how all this feels right now.

C: Actually, feels a little relieving- like it is ok to be that way and that expressing those emotions wasn't so bad.

Example #3- Working directly with the whole body can have a powerful impact on disconnected process. The Wholebody approach to FOT involves multiple channels in which clients' bodily process and life energy can open and flow forward, often allowing new ways of being and experiencing to naturally unfold. For example, I worked with a woman for many years who would regularly felt like falling asleep and moving into states of extreme withdrawal. Nothing we did or talked about seemed to make any difference in this pattern of disconnection, to the point that she was thinking of stopping therapy. It was during this time that I first started incorporating standing as a mode of processing in therapy. I offered this to her as a possibility for us to try, with the understanding that if nothing changed, perhaps we would terminate therapy.

What was astonishing to me at the time was how well she took to working in this Wholebody way, telling me that she always feels better when her body is moving! Since we have been using standing, including time for grounding, centering, and inviting movement, she has shown remarkable changes. Just standing and giving room for her body to move and do whatever it wants has felt very freeing, with little evidence of the pattern of sleeping or withdrawing being in evidence. What has happened is that her sense of WB self (Presence) has increased greatly over the past two years, and she seems and reports much more connection with herself from inside and with her whole body.

As a specific example, in several sessions her shoulders and upper back area will often start rotating, and as she walks around the room (which is her preferred way of being in sessions now), her whole upper body would keep making these wriggling motions. When invited to stay with what is happening, she would say, "I feel like my body is moving out of a straight jacket, like it is trying to free itself from being stuck in this tight fitting

straight jacket.” In other sessions, she describes this as “It feels like my body is shedding an old skin, like a snake, and opening to a new skin that feels jelly-like. It feels a little scary as this feels very exposing to be without the outer protection, but it also feels good to feel the sensation of the air against my skin.” Other times, she reports her body process as “My legs feel solid but not stiff, rubbery and flexible yet strong. Now it feels like this is happening with my whole body, like I sense a support for myself but is also able to move around. It feels wonderful not to feel trapped and stuck in one spot, but able to feel movement and energy.”

Example #4: The importance of WB Presence cannot be overestimated in helping to transform the disconnect process. This is true both for therapist and client, as together, a field of Co-Presence forms in which more of the whole person can just allowed to be, without pressure to change or do. What is so crucial about WB Presence is that it slowly enables clients to experience themselves as a physical organism in the present, something that the disconnecting pattern has not fully allowed. Being in Presence is also different from going into feelings or difficult places, which also helps to relieve stress of getting close to certain feelings, events, memories. Often there is a back and forth between Presence and the reaction of pulling away, or dissociating, etc.

I started working with a client who reported that he had gone through some type of ritual abuse as a child for many years, although does not remember any specific memories. He also describes how he has lived for most of his adult years in a dissociated state, with a sense of foggiess, disconnection from self and others, depressed moods, and shut-down of emotional reactions. When he first came to therapy, we encountered the part of him that wants to push to get to the “root” of the problems. “I am tired of living in a half-life, spaced out, not fully present or alive...”

I would validate this desire to live more fully and how something in him wants to “get on” with life. Yet we also established early on that other places in him were extremely terrified of uncovering memories and feelings, especially deep well of sadness and grief that seems to lurk just below the surface. I introduced to him that we could work sitting

or standing, demonstrated standing position, which he readily took up. Here is a sample from a recent session:

C: (while standing, and after I guided him into Grounded Presence) I can sense tension in my legs, especially my lower legs, like they are wanting to do something. I also notice some feeling inside, sort of a nervousness... and that sadness, like I could just cry and cry if I let it. (After a short silence) Now aware of wanting to shut-down, space out (with hands moving in a downward motion).

T: (Sensing on the edge of overwhelm) Let's step back a bit- slow down- there is lot here, and let's try to make room for all of what's happening here. Tension in legs, like they want to move, express something,... emergence of sadness... and something in you telling us this feels too much, too quick... Notice that we don't have to go into any of this right now. Maybe go back to sensing your whole body, feet on the ground, space around you, my voice, Presence, your own Presence, these can all be supports, also show that all-of-you here right now is safe... Remember that nothing happens here without your consent or permission... so you can stop, take some breaths, do whatever your body process needs right now.

C: (Stops, allows some deeper breaths) Yeah, now that you mention this, I was noticing how my feet especially my toes feel like they are digging in, providing solid support,... feels good, like they are planted. Feels better, let's my body relax more... Then the tension in my legs, feels like they want to kick ("and you can let them if that seems ok"). Reminds me of my martial arts training- now I feel it in my arms and hands (they move into a fighter's stance).

T: Yes, and you might take a lot of time here, give this all the space it needs to feel more of this stance your body is showing you, especially when you feel grounded...

C: Now its pulling away again- starting to zone out- feels scary to stay in that stance- like part of me thinks you will attack me. I know that is crazy, but ("let that part know that we

hear how it feels- that it is welcome here- and wants to feel protected, safe...”). Yeah, now that I sense my whole body, I know that I am very capable of defending myself... so it seems a little easier, and my feet are still grounded...

T: Yes, very important, that we really take our time to let all of you become fully present here, and that all parts of you are equally welcome. I wonder if it might feel ok to let us both be here- not having to do anything, just sensing how it is to sense your whole being.

C: Funny, as I just stand here (body noticeably seemed to relax, with slight swaying ...), I heard another voice in me saying “What are you so scared of? You are just standing here with Glenn, he is here for you, he isn’t going to do anything, and we are perfectly safe.” I had never recognized that voice before- feels like a voice of reality, telling me it is ok to be in the present. And I allowed some feelings to come and survived.

IV. Additional aspects of FOT with patterns of disconnection

Grounded WB Presence always comes first- maintaining felt contact and embodied connection with clients and their process. This is central in all FOT but is paramount in reversing patterns of disconnection. In addition to grounding in the physical body and the space, Grounded Presence also involves attitudes of non-doing, not-knowing and most importantly, non-pressuring. I often emphasize that just being here is important, since it takes a long while for the body process to feel safe enough and consciousness to expand enough to begin to unwind stress and enable the person to stay in Presence. During this time, we are bringing as many resources, support and life-energy to allow for the WB Self-in-Presence to develop and awareness of more of all of the person expands.

There are two other aspects I just want to mention in working with disconnection:

1) Often, clients will not necessarily express what they need, nor complain when therapy is not progressing or when life issues are not resolving. The part of the self that needs or feels something lacking or wrong is often kept silent, so that pressure can build up, resulting in flare-ups of symptoms and at times, losing energy and desire to continue

therapy. Therefore it is important that therapists not just wait for clients to bring up issues that are problematic whether in the therapeutic relationship or in their life. Just recently, my body sensed that something was “off” with a client, that her energy seemed to have shut-down, etc. When I brought this up, she casually told me that something in her feels like it has given up, and is ready to die, that there is no passion or aliveness in her. Through this exploration and subsequent Wholebody Focusing process in which she stood, her whole being seemed to come alive with a renewed energy.

Another client was ready to terminate therapy, as he said that certain issues he had mentioned months ago were not being resolved, and he did not see any progress. Now all during this time, he never complained or even mentioned any dissatisfaction, just as he said, “going along” with what he thought I was suggesting. Thus, I realized that I had been experiencing a lack of real connection with him, and my own “disconnect” from my felt sense of this allowed something to build in him that this point.

2) The other point I want to mention is the importance of always going slow, and being especially attentive to signs of too much opening too fast. The energy and feelings that are released when clients suddenly come out of denial, dissociation or disconnection can become incredibly overwhelming. I recall working with a client and making the mistake of actively encouraging her to explore some aspect of her childhood that she had always blocked out or minimized. When the “dam broke,” it was so overpowering that she nearly had a complete breakdown. So the principle here is to never push or press for anything, until there is a solid relational trust and physical grounded base of support. And always go slow, as Ann Weiser Cornell has beautifully stated, we go only as fast as the slowest part of us can handle. And Focusing and WB Presence are essential tools, along with the therapeutic relationship, to provide a safe, support for the reconnecting process to naturally happen.