



Integrating Focusing and Differentiation: A Therapeutic Path for Couples in Intimate Relationships

Evi Zohar

M.Ed., Couples and Family Therapist, Focusing Oriented Psychotherapist, Clinical Supervisor. Lecturer and workshop leader at "Bereshit" institute, "Ohalo" College, and various professional organizations in Israel and internationally.

Web site: evi-zohar.com.

Abstract

Continuing the workshop I've given in the WPC Paris (2017), this article elaborates my discussion of the way I interlace Focusing with Differentiation Based Couples Therapy (Megged, 2017) under the systemic view, in order to facilitate processes of change and healing in working with intimate couples.

This article presents the theory and rationale of integrating Differentiation (Bowen, 1978; Schnarch, 2009; Megged, 2017) and Focusing (Gendlin, 1981) approaches, and its therapeutic potential in couple's therapy. It is written from the point of view of a practicing professional in order to illustrate the experiential nature and dynamics of the suggested therapeutic path. *Differentiation* is a key to mutuality. It offers a solution to the central struggle of any long term intimate relationship: balancing two basic life forces - the drive for individuality and the drive for togetherness (Schnarch, 2009). *Focusing* is a body-oriented process of self-awareness and emotional healing, in which one learns to pay attention to the body and the 'Felt Sense', in order to unfold the implicit, keep it in motion at the precise pace it needs for carrying the next step forward (Gendlin, 1996).

Combining *Focusing* and *Differentiation* perspectives can cultivate the kind of relationship where a conflict can be constructively and successfully held in the inner world of each partner, while taking into consideration the others' well-being. This creates the possibility for two people to build a mutual emotional field, open to changes, permeable and resilient.

Keywords: Focusing, Differentiation, Couple Therapy, Intimate Relationship, Integration

Introduction

As a couple and family therapist, the Systemic approach is the basis upon which my professional world view is established. Over the past few years, most of my work has focused on two main therapeutic approaches: Focusing and Differentiation.

In this article, as a continuation of the workshop I've presented in WPC Paris,

2017, I wish to further elaborate the way I use concepts and techniques derived from the Differentiation and Focusing approaches, in order to offer therapists a fresh insight on how to evoke a process of change and healing in working with intimate Couples.

Salvador Minuchin (1981), one of the founding fathers of the Systemic Family Therapy Approach, regards the couple and



the family as an integrated live organism, wherein the whole is larger than its' parts, and each part effects and is affected by the whole, whilst retaining its' role as a part. According to Minuchin, the couple always functions within the context of the life cycle, from past to future. This compels the system to adapt to ever-changing external stimuli. It is a complex, rule bound system, with rituals, roles, beliefs, and past conflicts, that constructs layers of revealed and concealed meanings, where the intrapersonal effects the interpersonal. In keeping with this, Minuchin's systemic view is circular rather than linear, process-oriented rather than content-oriented.

Differentiation

Differentiation is an intra, as well as, inter-personal developmental process. It relates to the ability to balance two opposing forces: the drive for individuality and the drive for togetherness. According to Bowen (1978), Schnarch (2009, p.55), and Megged (2017), Differentiation is ones' ability to be close and distinct rather than distant and to keep an emotional balance and a strong sense of self within an intimate relationship. It is the ability to remain loyal to one's own set of beliefs, values and desires, while taking into consideration the significant others' feelings and needs, without feeling emotionally hijacked, or victimized by the relationship. Differentiation is a positivistic approach that does not seek early deprivations (what was missing) during early life, but rather focuses on what *has* occurred in the clients' life and how these experiences may later effect and even sabotage the person. This approach views the individual as a powerful and resilient entity, and emphasizes the significance of the "here and now". It associates the interpersonal difficulties one

experiences with the consequence of ones' present, and not only with the consequences of ones' past.

This approach acknowledges the potential existence of an Essence (or, "true self") within each individual. Over the course of a lifetime, this Essence becomes covered with layers of personality structures and habit patterns. While these might be useful in the process of social adaptation, they might also impede the possibility of conducting an authentic life. In the search for an authentic life one must realize that he will endure struggle and friction, in order to develop the capability of standing securely on ones' own emotional feet in the face of social expectations to change and conform (Megged, 2017).

The Differentiation based approach assumes that intimacy and passion are not automatically maintained in harmony in a long-term relationship, a system that, by its' very nature, invokes differences of opinion and conflict. Often, couples who find themselves in such conflicts deal with them by making personal sacrifices and compromises. These lead to anger and belligerence, which later manifest as punishment, manipulation, or psychosomatic symptoms. In addition, it may lead to triangulation of children and other family members that might alleviate part of the tension. Such a process naturally results in alienation and the loss of intimacy and passion.

The Differentiation based therapist is actively present, attentive and empathic to the explicit and implicit emotional states that occur in each partner; couples communicate (and understand each other even more than they would like to admit) verbally and non-verbally, through body language, conveying double or hidden meanings and messages. In the therapeutic process, the therapist is



expected to be alert and aware of couples' diverse means of communication. This is in order to reflect them back so that the couple may assume responsibility for the message they sent. Assuming responsibility can help each partner to acknowledge his inner needs and wishes, become loyal to himself and to his ability to self-regulate his own emotional field - rather than having to depend on his partner to do so for him, and all the while remaining attentive and taking into consideration his partner's needs, happiness and desires.

The basic assumption of the Differentiation based approach is that a couple's differentiation with each other is a central developmental achievement in the process of a long-term relationship, and a key to mutuality; both of which have to do with maturity and a cultivated mentality. According to Bowen and Schnarch, a person will seek a partner whose level of differentiation is similar to his own. The higher the couples' level of differentiation, the more the "Couple Entity" will be characterized by intimacy, passion, authenticity, and the potential space for personal creativity and self-expression. A higher level of differentiation uncovers the potential for evolution within the relationship system, while at the same time, reduces the restricting and diminishing potential which naturally lives in it as well. As opposed to approaches that tend to reduce tension and conflict, and emphasize the partners' role in soothing one another, a Differentiation based therapist will respectfully compel the couple to confront reality, while allowing for, and even escalating whatever conflict may arise. The therapist will creatively and authentically utilize the conflictual material in order to facilitate motion and change, prodding the couple to ever rising levels of differentiation

with each other. He will view the couple as a circular system, intervene individually, while bearing in mind that there is a constant interplay of mind mapping (Schnarch, 2011).

For the most part, undifferentiated couples will comprise of individuals who seek constant happenstance within themselves or in their surroundings, will be part of some alternating drama, will lack the ability to self-regulate their own emotions and as such, expect someone else to do so for them. They will be busy attending to, and resisting, what others think or expect of them, while being controlled and affected by it. They can easily feel emotionally flooded, and are likely to get reactive or activated by their environment. They will sometimes leverage, or even elicit, anger and a sense of righteousness in order to define themselves and find a sense of meaning, and by doing so they hope to alleviate some larger threat. Anger is one of several examples of ways that help a person define his own identity and organize threatening patterns into familiar templates, poor as they may be in the long term. In other cases, we may see passive, distant, evasive, people that can't commit, and we may witness their difficulty and even impotence in their ability to stand up for themselves in a long-term, meaningful relationship. Often times we will witness the ways in which they manipulate themselves and their spouse in order to relieve tension and anxiety, fear of abandonment, and loneliness.

Focusing

"Always Interaction First" (Gendlin, 1996, p.108-109).

The Focusing theory and practice were developed by Dr. E.T. Gendlin from the nineteen sixties of the twentieth century



until his death on May 2017. It is a psychological as well as philosophical mind-body approach, which emerged from C. Rogers' and F. Pearls' Humanistic psychology and Client Centered Therapy.

Gendlin was deeply invested (philosophically and psychologically) in exploring what creates change in therapy. His theory is rooted in an over-arching philosophy of change, which views man as an ever-interacting entity. The human body is constantly acting, reacting and self-organizing in the face of multitudinous information, both within itself and with the environment. According to Gendlin, a persons' "here and now" experience is dynamic and consists of physical sensations, thoughts and emotions, which may shift and change, and thus create transformation and growth in therapy. Current practicing professionals may rightly notice the similarities between Focusing and Mindfulness, which is the cornerstone of Experiential Psychotherapy. "Mindfulness" is a basic human ability to practice and maintain a moment-by-moment awareness to the sensations, thoughts, and emotions one is experiencing in the present. By doing so, and by paying non-judgmental, non-interpretive attention, to the "here and now", we aim to evoke awareness.

Focusing Oriented Therapy (FOT) emerged from the over-arching philosophical and psychological theory of Focusing. It is a process, an inner dialogue, a kind of subtle attentive listening, accepting and non-judgmental of the internal movement the client experiences moment by moment. FOT is about revealing the interaction between the world, the clients' bodily reactions, his mind, his feelings and the memories stored in them. The deep understanding (of the therapist and the client) that the healing movement and the

potential change are always present in the physical body, requires an attentive listening to what is expressed, beyond the visible and the verbal content. In FOT the attention is given to subtle nuances that are part of the physiological, emotional, and mental expression. FOT is about uncovering vague and preverbal knowledge, turning the implicit to explicit. Thus, the expression and articulation of this knowledge become clearer and accessible for the client.

Gendlin had coined the unique term, "Felt Sense", to denote a physical sensation through which a person may experience and encode everyday situations, conflicts, and issues. In the process of Focusing, the client brings his full attention and presence to this Felt Sense; a sensory experience, in the "border zone" (Gendlin, 1996) between the conscious and the unconscious. Focusing on the Felt Sense engenders a physical "shift" which leads to the next step in this funnel-like process that converges from the broad and exposed, to the condensed and precise, leading to the "aha" moment. The Felt Sense is not an emotion, but rather a holistic somatic sensation that rises in the body, having had a meaningful experience. It contains a complex tapestry of facets: meanings, patterns, images, words, memories, insights, as well as ideas for relevant courses of action. The Felt Sense exists in and of itself. In order to allow it to become a full-blown, physical and emotional experience, both therapist and client must pay a special kind of inward attention which is unique to Focusing. The body may experience a kind of relief following the encounter with the Felt Sense. This is a sign that one has made a connection with a deep place in ones' consciousness, and that the process is in the right direction.



During therapy, the client learns to listen to and acknowledge painful feelings and places he's stuck in, aspiring to create an inner relationship with them, in order to enable movement and transformation. The transformation and solution to the issues at hand will usually reveal themselves in each and every person differently, step by step, as part of a process, and in conjunction to internal sensations. Gendlin was searching for the door through which creative thinking enters conscious awareness.

FOT constructs a therapeutical process wherein the client will create an authentic bond with himself, a bond that invigorates and promotes a new trust in the processes of life, change, and self-acceptance.

These are six steps in the process of Focusing, according to Gendlin:

- 1) Clearing the Space: recognizing the issues or sensations that come up online, and creating space between them and the Focuser.
- 2) Felt Sense: an inner physical sensation that arises in the context of certain issues or situations.
- 3) Finding a key, or a handle to the Felt Sense: a word or an image, or metaphor that can characterize the Felt Sense.
- 4) Echoing: repeating the words or images that had risen, as a feedback which facilitates finding the precise words to the experience. Usually, when the echoing fits with the clients' experience, it will be followed by a sense of relief.
- 5) Posing questions: a dialogue between the therapist and client about the content that came up and the Felt Sense that came with it; the therapist asks open-ended questions and waits

for the client to react in his own pace.

- 6) Acceptance: recapitulating and accepting all that had risen along the way.

Non experiential therapies, are predominantly characterized by talking "about things", a phenomenon that may generate a distance between the client and his authentic experience, and produce a cognitive report which does not allow for internal motion and deep change to occur (Gendlin,1992). In order to bring the client closer to his authentic experience, FOT is characterized by experiencing and acknowledging the feeling "of things", sensing them directly. This discourse enables the client to be more present and closer to his inner experience, and to be able to discover new possibilities that reveal themselves in the process. Gendlin's philosophy is an investigation of the relationship between the larger implicit knowing, and the process by which it is symbolized in words and images. The reciprocity between implicit body sense and explicit articulation is the hallmark of his work.

Gendlin claimed that the experiences of the present may alter the past. Working with FOT enables changes in past experiences as well. From the point of view of FOT, the past is not a close-ended capsule of something that occurred, but rather part of a new present, a new whole. Within this new present, the past may restructure itself and gain a whole new meaning, one that would be felt and experienced differently in the body and mind. In the present moment the body contains the "new" past, as well as the seeds of the future that are hidden within the next step forward. (Ifat Ecstein, 2014)



Gendlin has realized and emphasized that each client-therapist interaction is unique. He says: "*You and I happening together makes us immediately different than we usually are*" (Gendlin, 1997, p.30). He viewed human presence as the most basic component in the therapeutic relationship.

In this approach, the therapist holds within himself all the methods and approaches he has learnt, and combines them in his work with the experiential field, from a humble position, that has faith in the process and that the client contains within himself the path and the solution.

In order for therapy to be directed towards the unconscious and the unknown, as oppose to repeating the known and the obvious, the therapist is in a position of 'Not Knowing', and make use of his own sensations, recognizing that these can be used as an important source of information about the client and the authentic interaction between them.

One of the cornerstones in FOT is the recognition, development, and reinforcement of the clients' inner presence.

Two notable components of a stable and secure inner presence that we aim at are:

- A. The clients' ability to self-regulate and self sooth; and,
- B. The ability to separate the "I" (the self) from the "It" (whatever emotional content that rises in the Focusing session), while keeping in mind that there are many "Its" simultaneously present in the mind-body, (as exemplified in the following vignette).

Integrating Differentiation and Focusing Approaches in Couples' Therapy

The couples' therapy approach that is presented in this article aims at forming a conscious and differentiated interaction between the two partners, and at initiating a personal, as well as mutual, process of development, through differentiation. The use of the subtle, yet profound, qualities of Focusing facilitates the continuity of the couple's significant differentiation process with each other. It liberates the therapist to be a *process* expert, rather than a *content* expert, or a third side in a triangle. I use Focusing as an individual intervention from a systemic approach point of view. All of the above serve to facilitate the shift from the implied and the unknown to the revealed.

In my therapeutic work, I integrate these two approaches, which view differentiation as a process and a developmental task that can only be achieved through interaction. Both view the client as an interactive part of a larger system: universe, nature, society, family, intimate relationship, simultaneously influencing and influenced by all of these layered components. They both emphasize the importance of the professional knowledge the therapist holds within him: psychopathology, developmental theories, the clients' history, his family of origin, his personal connections, various methods of intervention, and more. And most notably, both approaches emphasize the importance of the "here and now" and of the interaction.

The integration and application of Focusing with Differentiation based couples therapy, endows the therapist with the possibility of using unique and effective tools for diagnosis and facilitating a process of change and healing:



1. The use of Focusing as a process of mindfulness invites the couple to slow down and remain in contact with their bodies, and by doing so to notice the automatic bodily reactions they have *with* each other. In addition, it reveals the dynamics and unconscious patterns that influence the interaction between them.
2. Practicing the ability to dip in the interpersonal and the intrapersonal reaction, using Focusing and its' separation qualities, act as an inoculation against guilt and enmity. In such a position, clients may delve deeper into their inner experience. The therapist does not interpret, but rather allows things to surface and unfold as the clients' partner bears witness to the process, and remains connected and aware to himself. Learning how to pause, observe and acknowledge the experience, disrupts the cycle of shame, guilt and fear that some clients are part of. This helps with self-regulation and with developing empathy and intimacy, simply by the couples' agreement to expose themselves authentically to each other.
3. Looking into the ways in which mind-body relations are being expressed, stems from the understanding that these relations are a mirror to the couples' communication and dynamics. These ways are not only influenced by what was said, but are also deeply influenced by body language (tone of voice, gaze, gestures, coming closer and moving apart, the quality of touch, the gap between what was said and what was done, and more).
4. Through Tracking, the therapist expands his ability to follow body language and discourse step by step, and use it to lead both individual and couples' course of therapy. Such tracking helps the therapist understand, clarify, and acknowledge the reality of the couples' dynamics and to work with the revealed material directly and deeply.
4. Using mind-body aspects and experiential exercises from the world of Focusing, opens the door for the couple to reveal deeper layers that are beyond the current conflict. This allows them to have a direct experience of the patterns that run their relationship (leader and led, active versus passive, rigidity versus flexibility, pleasing, and more). As oppose to relating with these patterns from a cognitive point of view that may perpetuate them in the long run, deep grounded base for emotional change is formed, rooted in the experience and in the Felt Sense.
5. In the process of Differentiation interlaced with Focusing, the therapist seeks to help the client notice the conflict and the need that lives within it in the "here and now", as his partner sits by him witnessing and supporting this process. The therapist slows the pace and invites the client to remain present in the felt experience, whether it be inner tension, a power struggle, anger, or any other thing the client may experience in his body in real time. Staying in and even escalating the conflict allows for what is enfolded within the sensation to rise to consciousness, and helps the client to



acknowledge and become familiar with "It", and to separate himself (his "I") from "It".

6. The combination of these approaches in therapy provides a couple the means to practice the possibility of balancing two of life's opposing forces: of individuality and togetherness, without having to object or choose either one. It opens up an "and-and" possibility rather than an "either-or" one. Each partner develops the differentiated ability to attend to anything that might rise from within, in the context of the two opposing forces, and search in his inner space for a satisfying way to remain in touch with them, while still taking into consideration his partners' thoughts, emotions, happiness and desires.

The following vignette is taken from the fourth session I had with a couple (whose names are here altered), where the reader may recognize the steps of the Focusing process (as discussed above):

Shila (30) and Guy (33) have been in a relationship for five years, and had come to therapy because Guy struggled with the idea of marriage, while Shila was very adamant about establishing the relationship and become a family.

During this session their conflict came up again when Shila expressed her need for Guy's full commitment to their relationship. *...as we are talking I can see how Shila's hands are busy with each other, fidgeting nervously, rubbing against each other, her voice becomes more and more childish and tears are flooding her in a way that renders her speechless. At this point, very systematically, Guy becomes distant, one can almost see the cogs in his brain in*

motion with the thought of contempt, and rejection of Shila.

Therapist: Shila, I noticed that every time the topic of commitment and establishing your relationship with Guy comes up, your body becomes very reactive...

Shila: *(seeming a little surprised...)* really? What do you mean?

Therapist: I noticed that your voice changes, your breath accelerates, and that something systematic happens with your hands... is it possible for you to turn towards Guy and look in his eyes as we slow down a little? See if you can notice what you read in his face and how your body reacts to it *(I wait for her response...)*

Shila: *(looking at Guy's face, her hands shift around intensively)...it's a little embarrassing...yes...I always do this with my hands... (She stops fidgeting...seems embarrassed, and inhales so she could carry on...)* I hate it...

Guy: *(cuts her off in a very critical tone)* it's awful, you are like a baby, can't control yourself...

Therapist: *(I reflect back... allowing some space for the experience that fills the room to be...and turn to Shila)* yes... there is some embarrassment...you have just looked at Guy's face and the familiar hand motions...the ones you hate,



intensify ...and Guy immediately becomes critical of it... (*I echo back my answer in order to stay with the experience, allowing it to further unfold*)

Shila: Yes...it sucks... (*Tears well up, her voice becomes high-pitched and creaky, infantile, Shila becomes flooded and stops talking...*)

Guy: (*in a critical and patronizing tone*) Enough! Get a hold of yourself! This is no way to have a mature conversation about anything, this isn't why we came here, you're wasting our time here.

(*Shila cries, seems helpless, Guy is angry and impatient. Here I suspect I am witnessing a recurring situation in their life...there's a sense that a parental system is manifested rather than a romantic one...*)

Therapist: Guy, it seems that you have anger and criticism about Shila and about what's happening here...(*he nods*)...and Shila, you seem very flooded emotionally and crying...I want to encourage you to look at each other, slow down, and remain in this situation in a different manner...is that possible?

(*A moment of silence...they glimpse at each other, as if to make sure that they both agree to try something new...they nod...*)

Therapist: Can you, Guy, take a breath, clear some space as we have done in the past, breath into your own experience while looking at Shila, and choose, if only momentarily, to put aside your frustration, your anger at Shila, and the fear that you're wasting your time? ...Excellent...and I promise to give these feelings space as well, in a little while...

Guy: (*breathing, he takes a quick look at Shila*), I can...umm...I have where to put them...and it really is important for me to discuss them later, because this is what always happens: she cries, I console her, and I step aside and I fritter away my own feelings ...

Therapist: (*echoing his words in a way similar to the way they were said so that he may sense them in his body, and see whether they are accurate*)... you can put them aside...and it's important for you to give them space later, because you notice that you're used to console Shila at the price of frittering away your own feelings... (*Guy nods...breathes...his body signals relief...*)

Shila, how are you in there right now?

Shila: (*through tears, and in a childish, whispering voice*) I don't know what to do...he doesn't want me... (*Her tears gush out and her hand gestures intensify*)

Therapist: so these tears well up from inside, and intensify with the thought that Guy doesn't want you... and your hands clutch each other



intensively...and it sounds like there is helplessness in there too...

Shila: yes...I'm lucky to have these hands...they hold me...

Therapist: (*surprised*) you're *lucky* to have them...what do you sense when your hands hold you in this way?

Shila: (*waits for a moment and answers slowly*)...I sense power...that I won't let myself drop off... (*she breathes a little more easily, her crying subsided, she wipes her tears away as she glances at Guy and turns her eyes away from him*)...it's like a rope with a fisherman's knot in the middle of the chest, and the rope is held from above in the throat, and from below in the womb, dangling out of the womb... (*She finds the key, the image to the Felt Sense*)

Therapist: (*I echo the words and sensation as accurately as I can until Shila's body signals that it is precise, and then I ask her to try to look back at Guy*)... is this a familiar sensation, Shila?

Shila: gripping my hands, yes...since I can remember myself...growing up, they used to make fun of me at home...but this feeling of power surprises me...it's the opposite of what I thought, it always used to make me weaker...now it's as if to say that I exist...these words are surprising to me, I don't know where they're coming from but they feel accurate...(*she slows down, and gazes at Guy*)...I have this sadness, I'm so lonely...I've been lonely since forever... (*She starts crying again*) I'm so scared...

(*Guy shifts around uncomfortably in his seat...holds his breath a little*)

Therapist: (*to Shila*) so as you gaze at Guys' face you notice that you have this sadness and loneliness...a fear rises from within...let's just be with that for a while and see what else might come up when you give yourself an inner permission to sense it...(*I pause*) (*to Guy*)...Guy, it seems as though something is going on in there, inside you...is it the part of you that is used to quickly comfort Shila ...? (*shuts his eyes, nods*)...yes...there's an internal struggle in me when she cries... (*slows down*) a struggle between my need to comfort her and the possibility of letting her cry, it's unbearable for me to listen to it...my whole body is getting restless, now that she's crying again... there's a pressure in my chest...I want her to shut up already...(*pause*)...actually, I feel the urge to shut her up...

Therapist: umm...so that's what's there...chest pressure...internal struggle...you feel the urge to



shut her up, her crying is unbearable for you...it sounds as if the consolation you're offering her serves to ease your own difficulty...*(Guy inhales deeply)*...try to stay in contact with this... *(This understanding is something that is happening in the "here and now". As he gazes at Shila and he stays inside himself, he sees her across the room listening, but not reacting... Guy nods...silent...)*

Shila *(her face turns to him, notices him while focused inside herself, her hands are holding each other in a different position than before, and not as tightly, softer. She stops crying, breaths more easily and calmly)*, so there's Guy with all that came up now...and there's you with this sense of power and presence that you had earlier, and the fear that rose along with sadness and loneliness...what's going on inside you now, with all that happened so far?

Shila: *(she answers in her infantile voice, but louder)*...wow... I don't know what to say...my hands comfort me...they help me not be alone...actually no... they help me not feel lonely...it feels different in my body...this alone is different from my loneliness...they're both in my chest, but they feel a little

different and in a slightly different place... "alone" is higher up, while "loneliness" is deeper, next to the heart...*(she pauses)*...there was always shame when they made fun of my hand gestures...I'm relieved now that I know the gestures actually serve me...I'm not so much focused on what Guy said...I can't focus on him now...actually, no...I can, but I don't want to focus on him now...I'm perfectly able to because that's what I always do...I just don't want to...I can do without it, I don't want his consolations to silence my tears...*(she looks at him and clearly says)* I'm ok with my crying, I'm not ok with being silenced *(deep breath, signaling that the body understood)*...*(pausing)*...I'm in this internal quiet now, as if someone put a warm water bottle inside me that spreads warmth, and it's pleasant in my whole body, I'm ok...I feel that my hands are more relaxed but still support me, I don't want to give that up, it really empowers me...the feeling that I exist *for me* really empowers me...*(this is a step towards the differentiated understanding that she is responsible to sooth herself and that Guy's needs and desires (It) are not who she is (I), but she could acknowledge him and the*



differences between their needs at this moment, in this context, without becoming emotionally activated).

Following the above session, Guy and Shila kept coming for two months, having profound discussions about themselves and their relationship. Learning themselves and each other through Focusing and self-regulation, having become less automatic and more conscious. As Shila continued her process of connecting inwards, and letting go of her "external" discourse, she began to feel more independent, making differentiated choices – up to the point where she decided that she wants to end the relationship. Shila chose to end the relationship having come to the conclusion that she wants a long-term relationship where both partners are worthy of mutuality in their relationship, of feeling loved, wanted, and valued. Guy, on the other hand, was surprised by her decision. At the same time, he understood her wish and felt willing to assume responsibility over the fact that his difficulty wasn't actually in commitment in general, but rather in committing to Shila.

"Focusing Attitude" helps to develop an Observer Self, which develops inwardly, clueing into a position of spectatorship, which facilitates the possibility for differentiation. In its essence, Focusing holds special qualities of listening, compassion, empathy, precision, acceptance, patience, self-regulation, and intimacy, all of which are valuable assets in the process of developing differentiation.

By developing the "Observer Self", the therapist, in this therapeutic process, focuses on the clients' inner strength, motivation, and the inner critic. The "Observer Self" can contain guilt and shame, and examine whether they are justified, in order to

assume responsibility for them, in the most precise and feasible possible way. If these feelings of guilt and shame are seen by the client's "Observer Self" as unjustified (as belonging to an ancient defensive pattern that is being used by the mind-body connection in an effort to avoid pain, sadness, or simply to cope), the therapist will focus on the clients' acquired ability to separate them, and put them aside (an ability practiced in the first step of the Focusing process- "clearing a space"). This is a creative model for holding a conflict constructively in the inner space, without having to ignore it or erase it all together, and without collapsing from it, while taking into account the significant other.

Many therapeutic theories assume that in order to create a good, long lasting relationship, the therapist must teach the couple how to sooth each other, and thus to prolong the duration of their synchrony (when they are in tune) and mutuality.

From my point of view, the goal of couples' therapy is:

- A. To teach couples to recognize and acknowledge what *is* present in the relationship.
- B. To learn how to handle moments of being emotionally flooded in the current level of synchrony.
- C. To teach both partners to self-regulate online in the situation, to find an inner anchor, each one to himself (rather than depend on the other having to be the anchor), and;
- D. To balance the two opposing forces of individuality and togetherness.

Focusing is an awareness-expanding path and an effective therapeutic tool serving to achieve a higher level of differentiation of the couple with each other.



Workshop

The most dominant benefit of integrating Focusing and Differentiation based couples therapy is its powerful experiential effect.

My goal in the Paris workshop was to expose the participants to the direct experience of the effectiveness of the therapeutic path I have introduced. In other words, in order for the participants to fully understand my integrated approach, they had to experience its qualities directly.

The workshop hosted fifty participants from different countries, all of whom were therapists, though few of them were familiar with the Focusing or Differentiation approaches.

This integration, and the process that it facilitates, creates a dynamic of understanding and articulation, empathy, authenticity, and intimacy. It occurs between the client and himself, within the couple system, and between each partner and the therapist. As mentioned, it is nearly impossible to fully appreciate the powerful therapeutic potential of interlacing Focusing and Differentiation, without experiencing it. Therefore, the workshop was designed as a couple's therapy simulation.

I had the participants shift between the role of the therapist to the clients in five moves (frontal lecture, personal process of Focusing, the "magic stick" experiential exercise in couples, simulating a couple therapy session, and discussion in the assembly). Relevant theoretical grounds accompanied each move in order to clarify the rationale behind it. The shift between therapist and client was carefully planned so that the participants will experience (if only a glimpse) the Felt Sense, as well as to experience an immediate (if temporary) change in their own differentiation scale

(Bowen, 1978) facilitated by the Focusing process.

Following the workshop, participants reported that they noticed the experience had stayed with them, and that they took home practical tools for use in their own clinic and personal life.

Summary

The integration of Focusing with the systemic view of Differentiation Based Couples Therapy (Megged, 2017), aims to offer therapists a fresh conception to the potential change and healing process of intimate couples. The differentiation of a couple with each other is a central developmental achievement of couples engaged in a long-term relationship. *Differentiation* is a key to mutuality. It is about going forward with one's self development (individuality), while taking into consideration one's partner's wishes, needs, and wellbeing (togetherness). *Differentiation* is about getting closer and more distinct, rather than more distant. The goal of a long-term relationship is to allow both partners to develop independence, self-regulation, and the ability to stand on their own emotional feet (Schnarch, 2009).

The assumption is that couples who, over the course of their relationship, cultivate mental and emotional maturity (differentiation), will manage to overcome their adversities and live in a full-fledged relationship. A relationship that allows for a life riddled with conflict and disagreement in conjunction with passion and intimacy (Schnarch, 2009; Megged, 2017).

The integration of these approaches invites couples to assume full responsibility over their lives. To use their cognitive skills, their imagination, sensitivity and power, in order to deal with trials, to self-regulate their



emotions, to relinquish manipulative power struggles, in favor of a commitment to an authentic relationship, filled with intimacy, self-fulfillment, and happiness.

Integrating *Focusing* and *Differentiation* perspectives can cultivate the kind of relationship where a conflict can be constructively and successfully held in the inner world. It creates the possibility for two people to build a mutual emotional field, filled with intimacy and joy, open to changes, permeable and resilient.

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