

About Focusing Modalities

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I have always been fascinated by the differences between people and how we could describe them in order to learn more about the different worlds people live in. "There are as many "real worlds" as there are people", Rogers said, and people's basic assumptions, preferences, and habits in thinking, feeling and behaviour colour even the way they do focusing! In order to understand more about the precise way meaning may go from the implicit unknown to symbolization even in "difficult" focusing processes, I will give you some ideas about focusing modalities. They may be above all useful for focusing beginners when they learn about the different processes of symbolization.

Have you ever thought about the precise way we perceive and construct our outer and inner world differently? And perhaps carry forward our experiencing differently?
So let us start to have a look at the different worlds we live in!

First I will give you two simple everyday examples.

What comes first, when I say the word "rose"? Take a minute and try to collect all your ideas. And now I will tell you what comes to my mind first, and in order to enter my world please read and listen carefully.

When I hear the word rose, I immediately smell the flower. I sense the sides of my nose while breathing in and there comes this little satisfied sigh when it smells like the ones in the garden of my grandparents. I remember myself standing there, between the apple tree and the place where different sorts of roses are in bloom. It is summer, bees are humming, and the roses are as tall as I am. Then I remember these tender blossoms and petals, which are like velvet when I touch them with my fingers, and the remarkably strong stalk with thorns when I follow the flower down with my hands . "Be careful!" – the voice of my grandmother.... And with this all, at last the picture comes and I see the flower: yes, that is what a rose looks like.

Did you notice some resemblance or difference to the world you live in? How would you describe a rose?

Another example: **blackbird**.

Perhaps, some of you smile. Some of you frown. How do we - in our different worlds - "store" a blackbird? It makes a difference whether we once killed one on the street with a car or whether our teacher was mean to us because we always forgot the name of this bird. Or we have sweet gentle memories, like I have: I hear them immediately, and with the melody emerges this special feeling of twilight. I stand in my kitchen after a long winter, the sun is setting slowly, these remarkable long days again, I am preparing dinner with fresh green salad and new potatoes and the blackbird is singing at the top of the roof - springtime. Or another memory: I wake up in the morning, I don't know where I am, oh yes, it's the room of my lover, for the first time we meet at his house, I feel a little bit like a stranger, the future is open, it is not yet clear where our relationship is going –but then suddenly the blackbird sings from the roof outside, and I feel comforted and peaceful. And remembering this the song of the Beatles comes to my mind

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to arise.*

Could you hear the melody with your inner ears? When I listen to it, I think of a friend of mine singing this song with his guitar at the end of the day outside on the terrace of the house in which we train our focusing people, and we all were singing with him.

And after all this, there is of course the picture of the bird with black feathers and a yellow bill, sitting on the grass on a rainy day and pulling an earth-worm out of the ground.

So, these examples are about "modalities", as NLP-people call it. We borrowed the name and broadened the concept. We developed some theory about "focusing modalities", precisely describing the way meaning may go from the implicit unknown to symbolization.

I think it is very fruitful to realize which modalities are our favourite ones and the favourite ones of our clients. Nobody uses all entries in the same way, we generally have one or two in which we are creative and trained and others we neglect.

For example:

A preference could be in the field of the ears, the auditory channel: out of the inner experience there emerge words, sentences, melodies, sounds, noises... and the symbolization can be written down or spoken out loud to someone who listens. But this is only one way to symbolize. Others are specialized in the visual modality: they have images or colours inside and can describe them or paint them. Others have bodily felt sensations and can move or show us the way their bodies express the symbolization. And there are some people who feel emotions and express them or think thoughts or sense atmospheres.... . And so on...

Of course: all these parts belong together, but we have found out that people have their specific "entry", and as a client-centred accompanier I have to meet them where they are, and then follow their track, when they begin to unfold their symbols.

Now, If I were your client, what would you learn about my inner world?

Yes, I am a person with a rich inner world of sounds, melodies, words, and sentences.

Not without a good reason did I study language and literature and linguistics when I was young. Next, I remember atmospheres and moods very intensely. And third, in my world there are a lot of body sensations like smelling, touching, movements. On the other hand, pictures, images, and visual memories don't emerge quickly in my inner world! So, if someone asks me: what do you see? What does it look like? Can you imagine? and so on – I get lost immediately.

A little exercise:

You can try it for yourself and find out what your preferences are: please close your eyes, and think back: think of the situation in which you last led a person through a focusing process. What do you remember ? The atmosphere in the room? The noise in your office? Your own emotional state during this day? Her look - her clothes, her hair, her jewels, her perfume? Her voice? The content, the words and phrases she uses? The way she laughs? How she looks when she is touched or angry, the colour of her eyes? Do you remember how she breathes? How she sits, upright or sunken down? What sort of handshake, when you saw her? Or if you hugged her: how did her body feel against your chest, your belly?

So, what has all this got to do with focusing?

I think that it is very important to learn about these differences in order to better understand and not mix up ones own preferences and the world of other people. For if we do not take care, we speak and ask out of our own world to our clients or focusing partners – and miss the world they really live in, and so they have always to translate it into their own world like this:

Client: Gesticulates and says: it's something like a bowl (makes round soft movements with his hands)

Therapist: What does it look like?

Client: I am just forming it with my hands.

Therapist: Can you describe it to me?

Client: It is soft and cool and smooth under my fingers

Therapist: Can you just stay with this picture

Client: It isn't a picture, it's just a feeling in my hand and my arms of forming this vessel, it isn't finished yet, but it will be, and yes, there comes a word: to create something. That is important!.

You see what I mean? When the movement starts from the implicit to the explicit, from the felt sense to any kind of symbolization, we want to stay near the client's world during this process of unfolding. So we have to meet them in their way they perceive and construct their inner life.

Another exercise, which we often use during our trainings: Let people describe something they remember, for example "my first school house" or "the house in which I grew up". Then listen and watch carefully. Try to ask and follow precisely the modalities the client is in (even if they are not the ones you are accustomed to) so that they can unfold.

When I started with focusing more than 20 years ago, at first sight I thought I never could learn it. I never had pictures and the whole group and the trainer symbolized in a visual way and asked for it, and so I had a hard time.

On the other hand I had to learn that there really exist people who speak to me and forget the content afterwards or don't remember the sentences I have said... a difficult lesson in partnerships for example ...

Another important remark: often a modality in which someone lives apparently easy, a favourite one, can at the same time be a stuck place, an impasse. I personally tend to keep in mind most of the sentences people say – sometimes a gift, but sometimes a dead-end. So when I find myself repeating sentences over and over in my head, I try to leave this modality or begin to integrate pictures, images and visual conceptions into my repertoire to enlarge my inner world (like: "if you hear these words - is there a picture which fits?").

A client of mine had to do it the other way round: she suffers from severe attacks of obsessive thinking and feeling caused by photos or pictures she sees in newspapers or on posters–she had to learn to stop this visual channel and go to less frightening modalities like movements and sounds–thus having a choice, which helped her to leave these stuck states earlier.

And if you think at all the clients with severe chronic pain syndromes, they always feel drawn in their physical body and urgently have to learn something about the other modalities to find some rest and peace. And perhaps after some time they can come back to body sensations which are not only painful – and perhaps one day they even can allow a felt sense to come... I hope that I have been able to share with you some of my fascination about these slight colours of personal preferences!