

Eugene Gendlin's Approach to PSYCHOTHERAPY: An Awareness of "Experiencing"



Hart, 1970). Gendlin's approach provides an alternative to, for example, a psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioral, gestalt, Eriksonian, or bio-energetic approach to therapy. Just as there are Freudian, Jungian, Adlerian, and Reichian approaches to therapy, there is a Gendlinian approach. It is systematic. It has its own vocabulary, its own kind of concepts, its own linkage of concepts, its own methods, and its own way of combining methods. It is a distinctive, though not well-known, approach. This article presents a basic outline of Gendlin's approach to therapy.

Gendlin's basic concept is *experiencing*. Persons are experiencing processes. We apprehend the world moment-to-moment through our experiencing of it. A flow of experiencing is always ongoing in a living human being.

Gendlin uses the term experiencing "to denote concrete experience ... the raw, present, ongoing [flow] of what is usually called experience." The term refers to "the flow of feeling, concretely, to which you can every moment attend inwardly, if you wish." He continues:

It is something so simple, so easily available to every person, that at first its very simplicity makes it hard to point to. Another term for it is felt meaning or feeling. However, feeling is a word usually used for [specific feelings] ... But regardless of the many changes in what we feel—that is to say, really, how we feel—there always is the concretely present flow of feeling (Gendlin, 1997, pp. 3, 6).

What is particularly "human" about human nature is experiencing. Gendlin provides an example:

First, feel your body. Your body can, of course, be looked at from the outside but I am asking you to feel it from the inside. There you are. There, as simply put as possible, is your experiencing of the moment, now.

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ABSTRACT

Eugene Gendlin (1996) put forth his own systematic approach to psychotherapy based on phenomenological philosophy and Rogerian psychotherapy in several papers and a book (Gendlin, 1974;



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Eugene Gendlin, Ph.D

He concludes of experiencing, "Notice, it is always there for you" (1997, pp. 7, 13).

With his well-known emphasis on the "here and now," Fritz Perls was the cheerleader of experiencing. Gendlin is its philosopher. Experiencing is our ongoing understanding of an ever-changing now. Before we have explicit words, concepts, or other symbols, we understand the now viscerally through our experiencing of it. Human beings are not complexes, traits, or other contents. Human beings are their experiencing process.

What are the characteristics of experiencing?

Experiencing is *bodily felt*, "rather than thought, known, or verbalized." It is concrete, lived experience rather than constructs, abstractions, or generalizations about experience. It is pre-conceptual. It is there before concepts. It is internally differentiable—that is, different concepts can be made from it and thus different vocabularies can be used to speak of it. This is because it has implicit richness. There is always a "more" in any experiencing than can be made explicit at any moment. And, finally, it can become the object of direct reference. One can always turn one's attention inside and "tune in to," "look at," or "listen to" one's experiencing (Gendlin,

1961, p. 234).

When I make direct reference to my experiencing, Gendlin calls what I find the *felt sense*, a term he coined. A felt sense is a bodily felt, implicitly rich "sense of some situation, problem, or aspect of one's life." It is "the holistic, implicit, bodily sense of a complex situation" (Gendlin, 1996, pp. 20, 58).

Human beings can have a felt sense of most anything. This is extremely important to understand. Stop for a moment. Go inward. What is your felt sense of right now? What is your felt sense of yourself? What is your felt sense of your health? What is your felt sense of your career? What is your felt sense of your relationship situation? What is your felt sense of the world situation?

For Gendlin, the felt sense is crucial to psychotherapy. Psychotherapy begins when one makes direct reference to one's felt sense of the problem, issue, situation, or concern upon which one is working. By staying with the felt sense

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and finding a symbol that matches it, the felt sense unfolds its meanings and shifts. This *felt shift*—another term that Gendlin coined—is the feeling of therapeutic change actually happening. Psychotherapy, from this point of view, is a series of steps of finding felt senses, being friendly to them, accurately symbolizing them, and then feeling felt shifts.

Here is a simple example of a felt sense and how to begin to process it. What is my feeling of my writing right now? What is my felt sense of it? My felt sense is in my belly, it is "turgid ... struggling ... trying too hard to make my point." When I thus symbolize the felt sense, I feel more relaxed and calm. This is the felt shift. I go back to my writing from this now more-relaxed place.

The felt sense can also be a present experiencing of a past event. What is my felt sense now of how I felt this morning when my computer froze? The felt sense is in the scrunching up of my face, and the words are "irritated ... frustrated ... stymied ..." When I say "stymied," which feels most accurate, my face relaxes and I feel better.

The felt sense can also be my present experiencing of a long-ago event, such as a trauma. How do I feel about the eye operation I had at age 4? The feeling is in my chest, and the words are "sad ... sorrowful ... about how much it affected me ... especially the being left."

After I say "especially the being left," there is a shift inside. I feel relief.

Let us return now to the language of experiencing and say some of this over. For therapy to succeed, in this view, it must make contact with the client's experiencing process. There has to be a felt dimension to therapy. "Genuine psychotherapy [begins] ... at the point of going beyond the intellectual approach by helping the patient to an immediate, present experiencing of his problems" (1961, p. 234). The therapist aims to give what Gendlin calls the experiential response; that is, a response that points at the experiencing process in the client. The best therapeutic response is one that has "a concrete experiential effect in the [client]" (1968, p. 208).

In one of his best works, "The Experiential Response," Gendlin shows that

when they succeed, both a client-centered reflection of feeling response and a psychoanalytic interpretation work in the same way. One has to bring in the concept of experiencing to draw out this important similarity. Gendlin says that “a good client-centered response formulates the felt, implicit meaning of the client’s present experiencing.” Similarly, “an effective interpretation must somehow help the patient deal with the inner experiencing to which the interpretation refers ... to grapple with it, face it, tolerate it, and work it through.”

Drawing on his theory of experiencing and the experiential response, Gendlin formulates a hypothesis about therapeutic outcomes: “The greater the role played by experiencing during the therapy hours, the greater will be the therapeutic change and [the more likely] the successful outcome of therapy” (1961, pp. 240-243). To test this hypothesis, Gendlin and his colleagues developed and tested the experiencing scale, which measures the level of experiencing in a segment of therapy. More than 30 studies now show that a higher experiencing level correlates with more successful therapy (Hendricks, 2002).

Experiencing, the experiential response, the experiencing scale, the felt sense, the felt shift—we need to take one further step to grasp the essentials of Gendlin’s contribution to the field of psychotherapy. That is the step to specific methods and their combination.

As we have seen, Gendlin formulated what he says a therapeutic response must do. It must make contact with the client’s experiencing process. Next Gendlin asked whether this skill could be taught. If we know what people have to do to make progress in therapy, can we teach people how to do that thing? Gendlin calls this skill *focusing*. Focusing is making direct reference to one’s ongoing, bodily felt, experiencing process. Focusing is a precise specification of what successful clients do in therapy. For 30 years, Gendlin has been teaching

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people how to focus. This is what he is best known for. The therapist can teach the client to focus, usually through small steps of instruction-giving. Focusing is a therapeutic intervention that flows out of Gendlin’s perspective on therapy.

Listening is another. Listening is focusing’s fraternal twin. It is not as original to Gendlin as focusing is. Experiential listening is Rogers’ “reflection of feelings” response reconceptualized in terms of the experiencing concept. In Gendlinian therapy, focusing and listening are the basic therapeutic skills. They are two ways to make contact with the client’s experiencing process and help it move forward.

But they are not the only ways to do so. Gendlin’s book *Focusing-Oriented Therapy* is not only about focusing and listening. It also includes chapters on role-playing, imagery, dream work, cognitive methods, action steps, working with the critic, other body methods, and catharsis. Gendlin shows that all these methods can be used in such a way as to make contact with the felt sense and produce a felt shift. Keeping in his or her awareness the concepts of felt sense and felt shift, the Gendlinian therapist has a way of combining whatever methods he or she knows, not as an eclectic hodge-podge, but in a manner that is guided by a systematic framework that includes a theory of human nature and the nature of personality change.

In conclusion, Gendlin’s approach with experiencing is a rich, substantial, and sophisticated approach to psychotherapy. It deserves careful study and artful application.

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