

A Review of Focusing Groups Today – How they Work & What they Offer

Compiled by Gordon Adam

Changes groups, Focusing groups and Focusing circles have been around since the beginning of Focusing. In fact the original Changes group pre-dates 1-1 Focusing as we currently know it. This was an open ('walk-in') group started by Gendlin in Chicago where people could come to be listened to and learn how to listen, and to learn Focusing. Many different Changes groups, with varying formats, were formed by different Focusers in Chicago in the 70's and 80's. Most of the later groups were closed (i.e. not walk-in) groups and some required basic pre-existing experience of Focusing/listening for membership.

Fast forwarding to 2019, one of the first things to say about Focusing groups is that there are not many of them around, in fact there are only four Focusing groups in the UK listed in the 'Local Focusing Groups' section of this newsletter. I'm aware of some other groups that aren't listed but these tend to be closed groups for experienced Focusers, and I don't think there are too many of those either! In this article my intention is to highlight some particular groups currently actively meeting in the UK, and one in Spain, with individual contributions by members of each group.

Most groups meet once a month, but some meet weekly or fortnightly, generally for 2-3 hours or in some cases for a whole day. Most are peer-led, but some have a leader or facilitator. The format varies from group to group but all include periods of group listening and 1-1 Focusing. Groups meet in members' homes or in rented spaces. Most require some basic Focusing experience as a pre-requisite for membership, but some are open to Focusing beginners.

Some contributions from individual groups follow:

Bristol Insight Focusing Group *by Gordon Adam*

This group was established early in 2007 following an introductory Focusing workshop for Bristol Insight Meditation group led by Chris Wilson. I have organised and facilitated the group since 2009 and we meet once a month for 3 hours on a Sunday morning. The group rotates around members' homes or we meet in a rented space (Bristol Zen Dojo) if no one volunteers to host on any particular month. There is no fixed attendance fee but a donation is invited to cover hosting or rental costs and towards my facilitation of the group. Attendance of the group generally varies between 6 and 12 people, averaging at around 8 participants.

The format of the group includes: initial sit in silence with Focusing-style lead-in (15min); introduction/sharing round (15min); input & discussion on a Focusing theme (25min); tea break (15min); Focusing in 2s or 3s or small group (90min); final group sharing (20min).

Unlike most Focusing groups, this group has always been open to complete beginners. This is enabled by me taking time with any new people whilst experienced Focusers go off to Focus in pairs (or threes). The beginners group is generally 2-4 people, and I tend to ask someone to volunteer to just listen whilst I do a 10 minute Focusing demo, then we swop and I companion, bringing in the reflective element. Then we have some time for questions and answers about the process. I find this to be the most effective and efficient way to convey a real sense of Focusing to new people in a short period of time. We might then continue with each person taking a turn to Focus and to companion within the

small group, or else split into pairs for some Focusing practice, ending with everyone coming back together and sharing their experience and asking any further questions.

I think one of the most important and valuable things about this group is that it creates a regular, readily available, minimal cost 'open door' into Focusing. Over the years that the group has been running it has enabled hundreds of people to have a first experience of Focusing, many of whom have gone on to become regular Focusers. The only other ways to experience Focusing for the first time would be to pay to do a weekend 'Level 1' workshop or to find a Focusing teacher and pay to do a 1-1 Focusing session.

In the early days of the group my hope was for a committed group of Focusers who would meet up regularly – however the reality has proved to be somewhat different, and attendance varies from meeting to meeting from within a pool of about 80 people (as well as newcomers) who are on the group email list. Initially I found people's irregularity of attendance and lack of commitment very difficult and frustrating – I felt the group could be a richer and fuller experience if a body of committed people were to attend. I have come to accept that this level of continuity and commitment just isn't going to happen with the group. Since I have accepted the 'actual' nature of the group it has been a lot easier for me – it is what it is, it works well as what it is, and I appreciate and enjoy what it is!

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South Devon Peer Group *by Justin Haden*

There is something special for me about learning in a small group. Not only is it an opportunity to learn more about myself and develop new or existing skills, but there is also the potential to develop bonds with other people interested in similar things. When I trained as a therapist, our group got on so well that somebody suggested we keep in touch with each other after the end of the course by meeting regularly. A fair few attended our first get-together but then numbers dwindled rapidly until there were just me and two others left! Sometime later I undertook a post-qualifying course and at the end I advocated continuing to meet for peer support. Everyone agreed and so we all met up regularly for more than a year before people started to drop off until it no longer seemed viable to meet as a group.

So when I went through the BFA Focusing levels offered by Fiona Parr and someone suggested our group continued to meet, it was a definite 'yes' from me. What is different with this group is that 4½ years later we are still meeting several times a year. How does it work? One member lives centrally and kindly opens their home in South Devon for the 4 of us. We start with a drink and a Focusing-style check-in, updating each other about issues of importance in our lives (this can take half the morning). We tend to Focus in pairs or as a group for an hour or more. We all bring contributions towards lunch and continue so share as we eat, often something related to Focusing. We finish when we feel we need to go.

I've been reflecting on what has been different, i.e. what has kept us together for 4 times longer than my other learning groups. I think one key aspect is how we handle agendas. My two previous learning groups both suffered from unexpressed agendas that (certainly in one case) contributed to their demise. Focusing helps us become more aware of our implicit, internal agendas. Having acknowledged them we can, without judgement, be curious about their provenance, learn more about ourselves and then act from a better informed basis. I believe that extending the same attitude to other people not only increases safety and interpersonal depth, but also reduces the chance of hidden agendas scuppering the group.

Here are some quotes from the other members of our group about what benefit, meaning and value they associate with us continuing to meet:

"A kind of day retreat...a safe space."

"A long standing container...a ground built on shared experience, time and a delightful openness."

"A place of warmth and ease, laughter and weeping."

"A healing balm; heartfelt compassion always given and sensed."

"The advantage of common ground and the advantage of learning from our diversity."

"The trust that comes from having accompanied each other for several years now creates a safe space in which to examine and explore Focusing practice."

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Stroud Focusing Circle *by Nick Naydler & Gordon Adam*

A Focusing group was originally started in Stroud in 2010 by Gordon Adam after running an introductory workshop at the home of Caroline Redmond. Meetings were monthly at Caroline's place, and for a period combined with the Bristol group, with meetings alternating in Stroud and Bristol. The group ran for 2 or 3 years and then meetings stopped due to lack of attendance.

The group was revived as 'Stroud Focusing Circle' by Peter Gill and Helen Bower in 2015. The group meets for about 2 hours once a month on the first Wednesday evening of the month and the venue rotates around members' homes. The group is peer-led and is open to anyone who has done an introductory Focusing weekend or equivalent. No money is involved.

This report was compiled by Gordon Adam from reflections by members recorded by Gordon and Nick Naydler at two separate meetings of the group in late 2018.

People value and appreciate:

- Focusing with people we otherwise wouldn't Focus with; Focusing with a variety of people
- Formation of deep connections and friendships; networking of events and activities
- The opportunity to find a Focusing partner with whom to meet independently of the circle
- Experiencing different styles of Focusing and companioning
- The opportunity to Focus in 3s and (thereby getting twice as much listening attention!)
- The check-in which "marks people's journey through the year"; both the 'check-in' and 'check out' parts of the evening
- The group relating in an embodied way; the fact that it's peer-led
- The regularity of the group; the ritual and structure of the evening; the 5 minute silence at the beginning; the roving venue
- It enables new Focusers to join a Focusing community; the opportunity for newcomers to work with more experienced Focusers

On a more 'felt level' people appreciate:

Being listened to; being heard; being seen; being held; being supported

Being understood; being known; being accepted; being validated; being allowed/permitted

BEING PRESENT!

Group Contact: Peter Gill info@livingfocusing.co.uk

Grupo Cambios, Seville, Spain by Alejandra Johnson



Photo by Blanca Ruiz

When Gordon asked me to write about our Changes Group in Sevilla, Spain, I saw it as an opportunity to invite each member of the group to engage in reflection after many years together: How would *you* describe this group in *your own words*? What would you highlight about the way the group works? What role does it play in *your life*? These questions were included in a guided exercise for whoever wanted to participate. The suggestion was to find a moment to pause before our next meeting and to allow the answers to come in a short sentence or a few words, from a place of Focusing.

In the responses that came back to me, words such as warmth, trust, respect, care, community and family appeared again and again. One member emphasized *"the respect for each person's individual process, in a safe environment where trust and freedom pervades"*. Another member valued *"the benefit of having a safe place where I can show up with my vulnerability"* and one other expressed that *"this is a reference space where I can cultivate Presence"*.

There is a general sense that the group offers a space where people can pause, feel heard and have a feeling of belonging. What was appreciated about the way the group works was the regularity of the meetings and the commitment of the facilitators and each member in showing up and sharing a lifelong learning process.

These responses match Ciriaco Uriarte Ayo's original vision. Ciriaco founded the group in 2013 after leading his first workshop as a certified Focusing trainer. He had a clear and altruistic intention of offering a space for consistent learning and the larger goal of integrating Focusing into daily life; this is what he had missed when he had been a student himself.

Since its foundation, the group has been meeting weekly in the beautiful space of Sala San Francisco Javier, Centro Arrupe. The centre is used for a range of activities and it is where Carlos Alemany S.J., Focusing pioneer in Spain, studied a long time ago. Walking down the hallway one reads *"It is not knowing much, but realising and relishing things interiorly, that contents and satisfies the soul"* (Ignatius of Loyola).

The group has grown gradually since 2013 and now has over 20 members. Blanca Ruiz has played an essential role in this by maintaining close contact with all members including those that for whatever reason can't attend the meetings. She sensitively takes care of the practicalities and the modest rent of *the sala* is distributed evenly among all members.

Each meeting starts with a centering exercise inviting Self-in-Presence. We might sense whether there is a need to Focus at that moment or if we are available to accompany someone else. We then self-organize into pairs and agree when to return to the large group again, allowing some time at the end of our meeting for whoever wants to share something about their Focusing process.

When reflecting on this way of organizing the meetings, one member highlighted:

"Regardless of whether I'm Focusing, accompanying or observing that day, for me this meeting is an opportunity to PAUSE, in capital letters, because the quality of the pause allows me to connect with my friendliness, respect, non-judgement, patience and acceptance".

On the first Wednesday of each month something different happens: we create a space where we delve deeper into the Focusing process and reflect on a chosen article that has been distributed previously among all members.

In December 2017, we organized a weekend retreat in the country which included time for Focusing as well as time for creativity and fresh air. We have started planning a second retreat in Spring this year.

I conclude this brief piece with some open-ended questions about the way groups are formed and maintained. What is alive in a group beyond each individual's personality and contribution? How does a group have the capacity to remain open to diversity and self-regulate in a harmonious way?

At a time of increasing polarisation and fragmentation in society, it is a sign of hope to see how a community can be created and maintained. The very same qualities that allow a Focusing process to unfold are the ones needed to maintain community.

Grupo Cambios, Sevilla

Location: Sala San Francisco Javier del Centro Arrupe, Sevilla, Spain.

Frequency of meetings: Every Wednesday, September – June, 17:00 – 18:30 with a break at Christmas and Easter.

Facilitators: Ciriaco Uriarte Ayo and Blanca Ruiz.

Member profile: The group is open to anyone who has at least a basic level of Focusing (levels I and II from a certified trainer of the International Focusing Institute).

Fee: Annual rent of space is distributed equally among all members. Guests who want to try the group before joining are welcome.

Contact: If you are in Sevilla and want to come to the group, you can contact Blanca (+34 637847441), or Alejandra (+34 667071970)

Conclusion

From the accounts above, especially the quotes from participants, it is clear that Focusing groups have something unique to offer beyond the benefits of 1-1 Focusing. From my own experience of having been involved with several Focusing groups over the last 12 years I would sum this up as follows:

- A safe, supportive and accepting space where people can be themselves in whatever 'shape, colour or form' they are in at the time
- Being listened to, being heard, being witnessed, being accepted by a group of people
- A space to pause, be present, be silent, turn attention inwards, reflect on what really matters
- Building a sense of Focusing community, identity and belonging
- A place to meet other Focusers and form Focusing partnerships
- Learning more about Focusing and hearing about Focusing events
- Communion with like-minded people; building social connections and relationships

It needs to be mentioned that Focusing groups are hard to keep going in my experience, and I think one key ingredient for success is the presence of someone, or a group of people (but more often it's one person) who is committed to the group and who decides to stay with it through thick and thin. 'Thin' periods will undoubtedly come – this is the nature of groups – people get caught up in life events, lose interest, move to another area, etc. I have 'stayed with it' in the Bristol group for the last 10 years and although at times this has been challenging and demoralising, and on more than one occasion our 'group' has been just me and one other person, in balance I would say I have benefitted hugely from ongoing involvement and participation in the group, and it is currently 'going strong' with about 10 people showing up at recent meetings.

If there isn't a Focusing group in your area, but there are some Focusers around, maybe you could set up a group? There are lots of ideas about how to run it in the reports above. Also, in my experience, people are often willing to do a 1 or 2 hour journey once a month to get to a Focusing group, so the 'catchment' for your group may be wider than you imagine!

If you organise a local Focusing group and are open to new members please send me details of your group and it can be listed in the 'Local Focusing Groups' section at the end of this newsletter.

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