

Shrink Rap Radio #214, July 30, 2009, Focusing with Ann Weiser Cornell
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Ann Weiser Cornell, Ph.D
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Andrea Johnson)

Excerpt: *Sitting with people face-to-face, needing to give them something in an hour that was worth the money they were paying me, I needed to drastically evolve the way Focusing had been given to me. I needed to adapt and change what we had been doing in Chicago, so that it was more immediately helpful to people. And the first thing I learned was people need help to have the quality of attention toward themselves that Focusing needs – that’s what’s not simple.*

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest, Dr. Ann Weiser Cornell, speaking about Focusing. Ann Weiser Cornell, Ph.D., for more than 30 years, has been refining an approach to personal change that she calls “Inner Relationship Focusing”. Ann was getting her Ph.D. in Linguistics at the University of Chicago, when she met and worked with Dr. Eugene Gendlin, the originator of Focusing, as one of his earliest students. After teaching Linguistics at Purdue University, Ann returned to Chicago to assist Gendlin with his Focusing workshops and eventually, with Gendlin’s blessing, created her own approach to Focusing. Today Ann is perhaps the best-known Focusing teacher in the world, having taught in 18 countries worldwide over the past 29 years. Eugene Gendlin says about Ann: “In person and through her students and writings, she has given Focusing to far more people than any other single individual.” Inner Relationship Focusing is based on the Focusing process of Eugene Gendlin combined with Ann’s facilitative language and her work with her colleague, Barbara McGavin, on action blocks, addictions, resistance, obsessions, and inner critics. Ann’s own journey of personal growth has included recovery from severe writer’s block and an addiction to alcohol. Ann is also the author of the best-selling book, “The Power of Focusing” as well as another book, “The Radical Acceptance of Everything”. Now here’s the interview.

Dr. Dave: Dr. Ann Weiser Cornell, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Thank you, great to be here.

Dr. Dave: Over the past five years of this podcast, I’ve had several requests to do a show on Focusing. And I believe it was Gary Goodwin - who I also met at an International Association for the Study of Dreams Conference - who thought that you’d be especially good on this topic. So I’ve been chasing after you for some time, and you’ve been running around doing workshops, and you’ve been very busy. So I’m glad we can finally do the interview.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Well I've been devoting my life to Focusing ever since I learned it from Eugene Gendlin who developed it. And I have a good time teaching in different places in the world and really helping people learn this amazing skill.

Dr. Dave: Oh yes, well that does sound enviable. As you mentioned, Dr. Eugene Gendlin was the creator of Focusing. I had the opportunity to meet him, once or twice, and I'll say more about that in my comments after our interview. Also I seem to recall that I took a brief training workshop in the approach quite awhile back from John Wellwood. Does that ring a bell for you? Do you know him?

Ann Weiser Cornell: I know John. I know just about everybody in the Focusing world.

Dr. Dave: OK, so I am remembering correctly that he was in the Focusing world, or maybe he still is

Ann Weiser Cornell: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: OK, well as they say, enough about me. Let's start out by having you tell our listeners what Focusing is.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Well Focusing is a process of awareness of a funny kind of inner experience called a "felt sense". So then we need to go on and ask what a felt sense is, and that's where it gets very interesting. When Gendlin first did the research that led to his development of Focusing, he noticed that certain psychotherapy clients were in contact, moment by moment, with something that they weren't easily able to put into words. And yet, it was contact with this something that they could feel but not easily put into words that actually led to therapeutic change. For him, this connects to his philosophy of what it is to be human, of what change is, and that our experience is richly-textured. Words like "anger" or "sadness" can't capture what we really are from moment to moment. And so, a felt sense is the experience of an intricate whole "more-than-I-could-say-easily-how-I-am-right-now". And that's what Focusing is; Focusing is attention to that.

Dr. Dave: You know, I hear crossovers to other approaches as I hear you describe it. I don't know if you're familiar with the work Jim Bugental who recently passed away. He did something he called "Existential Humanistic Psychotherapy". And I can't recall the term that he used, but again, it was very much about an inner, felt sense.

Ann Weiser Cornell: I've heard of him certainly. I have not actually seen his work, so I don't know for sure. But I think what Gendlin's point would be about the felt sense is that we all have them, and any successful therapy helps people access that.

Dr. Dave: Yes, and that's probably the commonality there. Tell us a little bit about Gendlin's background. Was he trained in a certain tradition? What did he evolve out of to get into this Focusing work?

Ann Weiser Cornell: Well let me go all the way back to his childhood because that's really an interesting source for this work. Many people may not realize he's a Holocaust survivor.

Dr. Dave: No, I certainly didn't know that.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Yeah. He was 11-years-old, from an Austrian-Jewish family. The Nazis marched into Austria, and his father realized he had to get his family out. And when Gendlin tells the story about those times, it's as exciting as a thriller. He keeps saying as he watched his father make these difficult choices, - "Who should I trust to help us survive and find a way out?" - he would see his father tapping his chest. He would say, "Dad, how did you know not to trust that person?" And his Dad would tap his chest and say, "Something inside here knows." And so, at this intensely stressful and dangerous time, that impressionable young boy got the message of how people got an inner knowing that let's them know who to trust and who not to trust. How did his dad do that? So fast-forward to his days as a philosophy student at the University of Chicago. He was fascinated by philosophy, but what he kept wondering was how do people describe experiencing. And the kind of philosophy he was interested in was existential phenomenology.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Sartre, [9:38], and Merleau-Ponty. So he heard the rumor that over in the Psychology department, headed by Carl Rogers - who we've all heard of - they were describing people's experiences. As he tells it, he sneaked in and pretended to be a client, so he could pick up some of the study papers that were lying around, and soon after that became a real client of Carl Rogers. And he didn't stop being a philosophy student, but he became a psychology student as well. And so, he was a student, a client of Carl Rogers and later a close colleague.

Dr. Dave: Oh, I didn't know that background, that's very interesting.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: And it's not surprising to hear that sort of existential, humanistic, philosophical background. That would be the commonality with, as you say, Rogers and Bugental, and some of the other approaches where I'm sensing that resonance; for example, Gestalt therapy, Back when I read Gendlin's 1982 book, which I think was titled "Focusing", I had the impression that there was a lot in common with Gestalt therapy because of the emphasis on immediacy, the here and now, and paying attention to what's going on in one's body...

Ann Weiser Cornell: Definitely.

Dr. Dave: ...And how it changes from moment to moment. But it sounds like Gendlin came up with a very similar idea, but also independently.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Mm-hmm. You need to have that kind of philosophical background and even maybe that Holocaust background. He's really an amazing and unique person. I don't think anyone else has exactly described a felt sense with the philosophical concept that so much of our experiencing is implicit until it's described. And that's quite different from Freud's view, which is still very common in our popular culture, which is that we have buried or stored our emotional experience. Gendlin says, no, we don't have a storage model. You don't have repressed anger or buried sadness. Instead those experiences are implicit; they're unfinished. He literally says: "Pathology is the lack of a further experiencing". Experiencing has been stopped somehow, and in the presence of a therapeutic other that experiencing can begin to resume again. So, yes, the commonalities are there, and I think no one else quite has that felt sense, which is this rich, intricate, implicit experiencing that can be tapped into.

Dr. Dave: What about all of the emphasis these days on mindfulness? That seems to me to be another place of potential crossover.

Ann Weiser Cornell: I'm excited to see so much emphasis on mindfulness. I think that Focusing and mindfulness walk quite a long ways down the same path together. But I've heard people say Focusing is mindfulness, and I think those people may not understand the concept of the felt sense. It's not simply awareness of whatever is here. It's awareness of a very particular formation, the felt sense of a situation that has intricacy to it, and then symbolizing that. Mindfulness doesn't go into the importance of symbolization as a carrying forward of implicit experiencing.

Dr. Dave: What do you mean by symbolization?

Ann Weiser Cornell: Well I mean something as simple as putting it into words...

Dr. Dave: OK.

Ann Weiser Cornell: ...Or finding an image for it. So when I'm in contact with my felt sense, I then stay with my awareness of it, and begin to put it into words. In one famous story of a client, Gendlin describes his client who comes into the office: "Why don't I get a good relationship? Why don't I hand in my papers?" And he helped her to get the fresh, right now sense of it, and the words were "I pull back." And no other words quite fit. That's it. That brings a kind of relief: "I pull back." And by then, inviting her to sit with "the pull back", as he calls it, - he makes into "the pull back" - she's then able to make a big change. It reveals itself to be a part of her that's been in hiding, not wanting to be crushed by being brought out into the open. So the symbolizing dances with the sensing. The person who's focusing senses and then symbolizes. And then, they check the symbolizing back with the felt experience, and that carries the whole process forward.

Dr. Dave: OK. Are there particular conditions that Focusing is especially good for?

Ann Weiser Cornell: No.

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Is it good for everything?

Ann Weiser Cornell: I would say, yeah. Let me just come right in here and say Focusing is a human process. Within the therapeutic context, it's a client process. So it isn't something a therapist does to a client. It's not even a technique or a method. The method would be called Focusing-oriented Therapy. But Focusing itself has been found in every culture. When you study therapy tapes of every kind of therapy, you can hear the clients doing Focusing naturally. So humans have Focusing. Now there are certainly people, who may be in therapy, who may be at a stage where being invited to do Focusing, they wouldn't be ready for that. They wouldn't feel safe enough. It wouldn't be the right moment in the process for them to do it. But that's something that we can't categorize by a certain type of person or a certain diagnosis. No, it's something that can be sensed in the interactional space.

Dr. Dave: Something that I've heard and would like your impression about is that Focusing is good as an adjunctive tool, but it's not really a complete psychotherapy in itself.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Yeah, I think that's right. I think that's just what I was trying to point to there. Focusing isn't even a technique at all. So facilitating Focusing in the client would be one thing that a therapist would include in their repertoire. And yet, there's also a way of doing any therapeutic method, any modality, in a Focusing-oriented way. You can do Focusing-oriented, cognitive-behavioral therapy. You can do Focusing-oriented, psychoanalytical therapy. By making sure of each move you make, you've then invited the person to check with their experiencing of that, and sense what kind of self-impact that makes. You can say Focusing is more like water - it's essential to life, but you don't make a meal of it.

Dr. Dave: (laughs) OK, that's a good metaphor. So it's not a whole system in and of itself, and yet there's enough to it that you do workshops and trainings in it for many years now.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Well, yes. My workshops are to teach people Focusing as a method for them to use for themselves. And I work with therapists as well. And when I do, I invite therapists to first learn Focusing for themselves. And we teach also something called Focusing-oriented Therapy. And what we say is to do Focusing-oriented Therapy, first of all, the therapist is Focusing. So, if, when you're sitting across from a client, you have your own felt sense - who would do this, right? You're not just relying on textbooks, and formulas, and techniques. You're there present as a whole person with the client. Well learning Focusing as a method for one's self helps you do that.

Dr. Dave: Sure. It seems like the ability to be really present in the therapeutic session, really present with yourself, and somehow, therefore, at the same time, really present for that other person, really means a lot.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Of course. And we know that to be true, and we are often advised or told to do that. I help people with the how to do that.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, it sounds so easy to say, “Be a good listener.”

Ann Weiser Cornell: (laughs) That’s right. But how?

Dr. Dave: But in practice, it’s so hard. It can be very challenging. I think to some people, it just comes very naturally.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Right, and then they can’t describe very well what they’re doing. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Yeah, certainly not to all of us, it doesn’t come that easily.

Ann Weiser Cornell: That’s right. So many of the things that we’re advised to do - be a good listener, be present, accept yourself - I feel like in the Focusing world, we’ve developed specifically how to do that. We can show you step-by-step.

Dr. Dave: Well maybe we can go through some of those steps as we go along here. I know that in your work, you’ve evolved Focusing over time. You’ve even got a recent book called “The Radical Acceptance of Everything”. Maybe before we talk about the book, say a little bit about the elements you’ve introduced into the mix in the process of evolving Focusing.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Well what struck me immediately when I first learned it, which was 37 years ago, was that it wasn’t so easy for me to do. I think that ultimately made me a very good teacher of it.

Dr. Dave: Sure, because you had to break it down and understand it.

Ann Weiser Cornell: I wasn’t one of those natural Focusers. The fact that I had to struggle to learn it gave me a lot of insight into what people needed in order to learn it.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Ann Weiser Cornell: And by the way, I wasn’t studying to be a therapist. I was a student of Linguistics when I first encountered Gendlin at the University of Chicago, at a free community meeting and learned Focusing only for myself. No one thought there would be such a profession as a Focusing teacher. So who knew where that

would ever lead. I really wanted self-awareness. I wanted freedom from the suffering of being 22-years-old and having come from a dysfunctional, alcoholic family, and never having done any introspection before. And it was amazing what Focusing did for me, even back then.

Dr. Dave: Maybe you could say a little bit more about that. Say a little bit about how that process worked for you.

Ann Weiser Cornell: OK. And first, I should probably say that what Gendlin was teaching in this community meeting was for people to be peer counselors, so we learned how to be Focusing partners.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Ann Weiser Cornell: I never worked with him directly. He taught the group, and then we practiced with each other. And so, it's also a model of community healing that people can do in pairs with each other, and that's how I teach it to this day.

Dr. Dave: OK.

Ann Weiser Cornell: So here I was 22-years-old, practicing and exchanging the skills of Focusing and empathic listening, eight hours a week, with four different Focusing partners every week, and encountering myself. I discovered I had a self; I had insides. My background up until that time was of living in a dysfunctional, alcoholic family in the Midwest, where denial is the way of life. I could tell you how everybody else was feeling in a room and had no clue about how I felt.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Ann Weiser Cornell: So it was a journey of discovery. And it was a self-guided journey of discovery. My friends were there simply saying back to me what they heard me say, and it was gorgeous. It was intense. It was hard, but I ultimately, step-by-step, got myself back. I could tell you how I felt. I got closer and closer to being able to tell how I felt moment to moment; it took months. I remember when I got up to being able to tell what I had felt two hours before. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Well that's true for a lot of us. We don't know until later, when we're brushing our teeth: "I should have said such-and-such." (laughs)

Ann Weiser Cornell: That's right. Or, "Ouch, that hurt what she said and I smiled at the time."

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Ann Weiser Cornell: And so, I love being current with myself, and that's one of the

gifts Focusing gave me almost immediately, within the first year. Focusing has given me the gift of being able to make decisions that were right for me, rather than being the logical thing to do, or society's right thing to do. For example, I was supposed to be a Linguistics teacher. I got a Ph.D. in Linguistics; I got fellowships where I promised I would be a teacher. But I already had Focusing by the time I started teaching Linguistics, and I could tell that it felt wrong. And very quickly, I got out of there without knowing what I was going to do instead. I took the leap because I could trust that inner sense of wrongness and rightness that Focusing had enabled me to have.

Dr. Dave: Wonderful.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: That's great.

Ann Weiser Cornell: So where were we? (laughs) I was telling you about how I've evolved, yeah?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and we were talking about how Focusing has evolved under your care.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Right. So since I'm telling you my life story, I'll tell you the next step. I left teaching Linguistics, and by that time Gendlin's book had been published, and he invited me to teach with him.

Dr. Dave: That must have been wonderful.

Ann Weiser Cornell: So that's when the profession of Focusing teaching began. As his book got more and more popular, people kept calling him from all over the world to say: "When's your next workshop?", and we'd be giving these workshops every few months. And then I moved to California, in 1983, thinking: "Oh no, I'm leaving the center of the world for Focusing", which was Chicago at that time. But actually it was the best thing that could have happened for me. I wanted to be an independent Focusing teacher in California. I put my ads in "Open Exchange" and "Common Ground", and people started showing up. And I had been a therapist in Illinois, but I didn't want to be a therapist in California; I wanted to be simply a Focusing teacher. But sitting with people face-to-face, needing to give them something in an hour that was worth the money they were paying me, I needed to drastically evolve the way Focusing had been given to me. I needed to adapt and change what we had been doing in Chicago, so that it was more immediately helpful to people. And the first thing I learned was people need help to have the quality of attention toward themselves that Focusing needs – that's what's not simple. So Focusing needs us to be non-judgmental, accepting, and have a curious, open, aware attitude, or we can't even do the simple sensing and describing that Focusing needs. So we needed almost some pre-Focusing because so many people, as we know, are not in that state with

their own experiencing at all. Instead people are evaluating how they feel. We're judging how we feel. We're trying to fix how we feel. And that led me to understand that what I needed to concentrate on with people was their quality of relationship with their own inner experience, and I began to call it "Inner Relationship". So what can I do to help people move into a relationship with themselves that's non-judgmental, accepting, open, and curious?

Dr. Dave: Yes, that makes a lot of sense to me.

Ann Weiser Cornell: It does. And that really is what became my main focus. And I evolved a kind of language that people can use themselves that enables them to move into that state. I began to calling it the "state of presence", presence being the ability to be with whatever arises in you. You can be in presence, or you can be out of presence.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Out of presence is identification with a part of ourselves. So if I'm identified with emotional experience, if I'm saying things like, "I'm angry" or "I hate this feeling", then I'm not going to be able to get the Focusing from there. Unless I get some help, or I help myself dis-identify, to say, "Something in me is angry" or "Something in me doesn't like this feeling", and then that little shift is actually huge in the inner world.

Dr. Dave: Now it sounds like this might lead into your book, which you call "The Radical Acceptance of Everything".

Ann Weiser Cornell: Exactly. Now you see where that title comes in. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: Yeah. So the question arises how does one accept everything?

Ann Weiser Cornell: Exactly. How does one accept everything? And just to be sure we understand each other and people understand what I mean by accepting everything, I'm not talking about accepting everything that happens in the outer world – that would not be my department. But if we just look at the inner world, the radical acceptance of everything that arises in us - our thoughts, our feelings, our emotions, our reactions - that can be done, and it's the fastest way to transformation. What I see as really tragic is that people get locked into the attempt to change themselves by disrespecting themselves, by not accepting: "I can't accept that because it's got to change" - that type of attitude. You know, I work with a lot now with people who have what I call "action blocks": "I can't get my paper written." "I can't get my resume polished up to send out for a new job", and that sort of thing.

Dr. Dave: Right.

Ann Weiser Cornell: And it turns out you can invite the part of you that's not getting

the paper written, the part of you that's not wanting to get the resume polished. And if you do Focusing with that and get a felt sense of it, get interested in it, and let it tell its story, transformation happens. Life starts to move. The blocked, stuck places start to open up. But, so often, what I need to help people do first is turn toward the other part of them, the one that's anxious, urgent, worried. "I can't accept that." "I can't be nice to that." "I can't listen to that because it is my enemy." And what I've discovered through working with this material, over 37 years - if you count the years, in which I worked with myself - there are no enemies inside. There is nothing in us, in each of us, that's trying to hurt us. Everything's trying to save our life. I don't even believe in the concept of self-sabotage because if you say it that way, it sounds like there's a part of you trying to hurt you. We'll say, "I'm sabotaging myself." They're not.

Dr. Dave: How do you account for the stuff that looks like that?

Ann Weiser Cornell: Thanks for that great question.

Dr. Dave: (laughs) OK.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Let me take my own example. I used my brand of Focusing, which I call Inner Relationship Focusing, to relieve a really severe writer's block. And partly what I mean by severe is that I yearned to write, I longed to write, and I felt like it was my destiny to write, and I just couldn't.

Dr. Dave: Oh, I've been there. I can relate to that. (laughs)

Ann Weiser Cornell: (laughs) And you can agree, can't you, that it's really painful...

Dr. Dave: Oh yes.

Ann Weiser Cornell: ...To feel like what's right in front of you, your very path to your life fulfillment is exactly what you can't do. And no wonder in our frustration with such a situation, concepts like self-sabotage come up. So the story was that I sat down to do Focusing with this issue and invited the part of me that didn't want to write. Not being in touch with it at that moment, but just by inference - since I longed to write and I'm not writing - there must be a part of me that doesn't want to write. I didn't know what was going to happen. But in response to my invitation - I'm also sensing in my body at this point because that's where we get these felt senses - I began to feel something. The part of me that doesn't want to write was showing up in my body at that moment as a kind of constriction. And notice it's not so easy to describe; I can't be glib in what was being found there. I felt it, but I couldn't easily describe it; that's what felt senses are like. So there, maybe in the chest, something like a pulling forward or constriction, and I stayed with it. And as I stayed with it, more began to come. It showed me it wasn't just constriction. It was like ducking. It was trying to pull my body over into a ducking motion. And as I stayed with that I began to get the image of a target range. It was as if this place

inside me that didn't want me to write felt I was on a shooting range down by the target...

Dr. Dave: Oh yes.

Ann Weiser Cornell: ...And it was trying to pull me over to duck. And this was all new to me; I didn't know any of this. So I stayed with it with this attitude of interested acceptance. And then, it started showing me memories of what it had been like to live with my sarcastic father, and that was like being shot at. And then, in the process of Inner Relationship Focusing, we then really let it know we hear it. So I said, "Oh, I really see. I hear what you're showing me. Oh, no wonder." "No wonder" is also a great phrase I like to use. "No wonder you've been stopping me from writing, if that's what you don't want to have happen to me again." And I felt a release in my body when I did. The constriction released. There was a fresh, warm flow of energy in the place where it had been, and writing was easier. Now I won't say one session changed everything; I had a number of sessions about such an entrenched issue as that one, but it was part of the answer. And I'm telling you that story now to give you an example of what we mean when we say something can look like self-sabotage. From the outside, we can be mystified, "Why? I want to write. I know my destiny is to write. Every good thing would come from writing. Why would something in me not want to?" And then, it turns out there's a part that believes that will lead to something that will hurt you.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that's a great illustration.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Mm-hmm. And I could know the answer, and I could know Intellectually, it's because it doesn't want me to be criticized. But it's different when you do it from the inside as a freshly-encountered, felt experience – then something shifts.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that's a subtle but important distinction, isn't it?

Ann Weiser Cornell: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Dave: I'm struck by the fact that you were able to do that work with yourself. I know sometimes I find it difficult to do that sort of a process with myself, with myself, by myself. It seems to help me to have somebody else there who's going to keep me - it's hard to avoid using the word "focused" all the time - focused or directed.

Ann Weiser Cornell: I'm really happy you noticed. What was missing in my story is that there was somebody else there, and just to keep it simple, I didn't mention there was a Focusing partner. So that other person wasn't making suggestions and wasn't giving me input. That other person was simply reflecting back to me my experiencing, and helping create a safe space for me to do that work.

And believe me, it would have been pretty much impossible for me to do it without another person in there.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Another person really adds something very important.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, somehow it helps to keep you on the dime.

Ann Weiser Cornell: It does.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Ann Weiser Cornell: The presence of another person is magical and very, very, very empowering. As long as that person isn't interfering and bringing in something from outside the mix in a way that you can feel isn't helpful.

Dr. Dave: Mm-hmm.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Sometimes it feels good to get some kind of input and opinion - "Oh, what would you do?" - but then we need time to take that inside and check if it fits. So they need to not be doing too much. So it's the Focuser, the person doing the Focusing on their own experiencing, who puts the check on that.

Dr. Dave: OK. Well you've just given us a good illustration of working with what you call action blocks. And I notice you've also described as working with addictions, resistance, obsessions, and inner critics.

Ann Weiser Cornell: That's right.

Dr. Dave: Do you want to say something about those other sorts of issues?

Ann Weiser Cornell: (laughs) Well they all have something important in common. In fact, you can see addictions as the inverse of action blocks. So an action block is when there's something that you'd like to be doing, but you're not doing it. And an addiction is when there's something that you'd like to stop doing, but you're not stopping it.

Dr. Dave: OK.

Ann Weiser Cornell: So they're both about action really; either blocked action, or you could say "out of control" action. And I've certainly had my own history with addiction as well. One of the real sources of my more recent work with Inner Relationship Focusing is my own recovery from addiction to alcohol. And understanding that what had been happening, when I was within the tangle of drinking addictively and arguing with myself, trying to stop it but then doing it,

saying I should do it – I was caught up in identification with these different parts of me. What wasn't there in that tangle or inner struggle was the sense of me as a whole self, what my colleague, Barbara McGavin and I call "self-in-presence". So self-in-presence needed to show up. And it was through realizing I'd been using alcohol addictively, stopping, and then trying to understand what had happened, that Barbara McGavin and I began really to develop the part of our work where we work with some of the most difficult areas that people face.

Dr. Dave: Well addictions are notoriously difficult.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Addictions are very difficult. And one that we find even more difficult is something we call unfulfilled desire; longing. But definitely addictions are difficult. So there's the part that wants to do the action, the part that wants to do the behavior, the part that's trying to stop it, and then self-in-presence. Neither one of those, not getting identified with, not becoming one part of the other - within the tangle, within the struggle, there is no way out; it's a closed system. We need to step out of that closed system and be the self that can hold that whole system, and the different parts that are involved with curiosity.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Ann Weiser Cornell: That's then when Focusing can begin.

Dr. Dave: I like your use of the word "tangle" instead of neuroses, or pathology, or some other heavily-loaded word.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Exactly.

Dr. Dave: Tangle really captures it in a nice and nonjudgmental way.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Thank you. Yeah, we're trying to use that vivid language that doesn't make assumptions. We start with a tangle.

Dr. Dave: Do you have some other great words that you use? (laughs)

Ann Weiser Cornell: (laughs) Probably.

Dr. Dave: I noticed in one place you talked about something you call "facilitative language". And with your background as a Linguist, what do you mean by facilitative language?

Ann Weiser Cornell: Oh yes. Facilitative language shows that we can shift our own experiencing just by shifting the language that we use. And, in particular, we have something we call "presence language", where you use five words that change the experience of being identified with a part of us, to the experience of being able to be with that, and that begins to make Focusing possible. When we're identified, we

can't do Focusing; that's what I was discovering when I first worked with it independently. But presence language, five words: "I'm sensing something in me." So we start with a phrase like, "I'm angry" or "I'm angry at her", and then shift to "I'm sensing something in me is angry at her." Notice what happens. Taking the emotional sense like that - "I'm sad about it", "I'm worried" or "I'm tired" - those are sentences spoken from an identified position.

Dr. Dave: And so, you're frozen in that position.

Ann Weiser Cornell: You're frozen in that position. It's what we call merging with the part of us that has those emotions. And it feels at that moment like that's all of you. That's what emotions do. They narrow our focus. They're meant to do that. From an evolutionary stance, having an emotion like anger, you need to narrow your focus so you can fight or flee, or whatever you need to do. But it isn't helpful to stay in an emotional position if all you want to do is understand what's going, and be able to communicate about it to the people involved. So how do we step back from emotional identification into being with that part of us that has the emotion? When I was growing up in the Midwest, we had only two ways to be emotion experience. Our favorite way was denial, which was, "No sweetie, I'm not angry" - my mother. "No sweetie, I'm not angry with you. I'm just terribly disappointed."

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Ann Weiser Cornell: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: I can hear your mother in there.

Ann Weiser Cornell: (laughs) And in the child's body, you know that's a lie, but it's very confusing, because you're never going to get them to know it anyway. So identification with an emotion is a narrow experience; it's a partial experience. What we need is to step back away from identification, but not through denial of it. We stay in presence with the emotional experience, and yet, identify with something larger than that. So that's why we call this presence language. So not "I'm angry", but "I'm sensing something in me is angry"; and when you do that you begin to be able to feel it. This is something I do in my classes. I invite people to start with a sentence that is an identified language - "I'm angry", "I'm upset", "I'm bored", "I'm tired" - something they feel at the moment or they've recently felt. Then I have them shift to, "I'm sensing something in me is bored...or tired...or worried". And notice what happens when you just change your language. "I'm sensing something in me is a bit nervous." And what often happens is you get introspective at that moment. Instead of being caught up in something and ready to act out of it, you turn toward it, and you start to get curious. This is a huge shift, one that enables us to access more of our available intelligence. It enables us to meet others in a way that makes them more likely to be open to us. Feel the difference between "I'm angry at you", and "I'm sensing something in me is angry at you." Our relationships get better, plus, we've taken the first step toward a process of self-awareness. "I'm sensing

something in me is angry.” “Actually now that I’ve said that much, it’s not so much angry, it’s more like...” Then there’s an evolutionary process. Emotions evolve once you start sensing how you feel from what we call self-in-presence, from a larger perspective. The emotions evolve. I think a lot of the ways people speak about emotions these days is they assume it’s not going to change. Emotions are spoken of like furniture - “I need to get over that anger” or “I need to get around that sadness”, or get through that - instead of treating them like “e-motions”, something that is process, or something will change when you spend time with it.

Dr. Dave: Interesting. In some ways, it sounds like Buddhist meditation, where you’re invited to watch your feelings come and go and change, but without judgment and without attachment. But you’re adding something extra, which is some intention to do something about it, somehow.

Ann Weiser Cornell: There’s an intention to get to know it better.

Dr. Dave: OK.

Ann Weiser Cornell: As we were saying earlier about mindfulness, the process of Inner Relationship Focusing walks down the path quite a long way with Buddhist meditation, especially what’s called vipassana, or mindfulness meditation, where you are noticing body awareness as part of what you’re noticing arise and fall. But with Focusing, you’re staying engaged. There’s a relationship there, a relationship with curiosity and interest. It’s more personal; more intra-personal and more personal in an inner way. And so, there’s an exploration; there’s a getting to know better. And with Gendlin’s original concept of what a felt sense is, we understand that once you have interested contact with what you’re feeling, it always evolves. There’s no such thing as feelings being like objects. They are always in a process of evolution when we bring awareness to them in this nonjudgmental way. When our feelings seem to stay the same, year after year, it’s because they haven’t had an open, nonjudgmental awareness brought to them in this way that we’re talking about.

Dr. Dave: Now I seem to recall from Gendlin’s book that part of his process was to also have an image emerge, almost like a visual image that somehow captures the essence of the feeling. And an example of that in the story that you told was the target.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And is that still a part of your work?

Ann Weiser Cornell: Oh yes, that’s what we call symbolization. But what is interesting to me is that you can really trust the process to bring that. There’s no need to invite specifically an image or words, or one or the other. You just open to the way it wants to express itself. People are delightfully different that way. Some get lots of images very easily, and they need to be slowed down a bit and brought into

the body. Others are quite verbal, but their words help them stay with something that they're feeling. Others have long periods of silence where they're simply aware of something quite kinesthetic. So in terms of the different modes of process – visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and so on – Focusing crosses over all of those. It's possible to do it in all those ways.

Dr. Dave: Well this has really been fascinating, and we're coming to the place where I think we need to begin to wind down. What's your recommendation to any current or would-be therapist, who might wish to have training in Focusing?

Ann Weiser Cornell: Well I give training in Focusing to therapists.

Dr. Dave: Oh my goodness.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Have a look at my website. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Right, and I'll put a link to your website. You might want to mention it right now. What's the address?

Ann Weiser Cornell: www.FocusingResources.com.

Dr. Dave: OK, that's easy. What about recommendations for listeners who might wish to explore Focusing as a client? I suppose one would be to read your book.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Yeah, and people who might want to visit www.FocusingResources.com, my website, will see four portals or doorways. One is for therapists, in particular, and we have some great programs for therapists. One is for people interested in exploring getting unblocked or working with...I'm forgetting my own website. Anyway, there are doorways for individuals to explore Focusing. There are doorways for therapists to explore Focusing. And my book, "The Power of Focusing" is still in print and is still available. The new one is "The Radical Acceptance of Everything".

Dr. Dave: You really did get over that block, didn't you? You wrote not one book, but two.

Ann Weiser Cornell: I write all the time now. It's completely gone.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that's wonderful.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Yeah. So also on the website, there will be free resources and some free calls that we did, where we take you through some processes. A lot of articles are there. I have a free e-zine, an e-newsletter. If you want to hear a tidbit from me once a week, you can sign up for that.

Dr. Dave: OK, great.

Ann Weiser Cornell: We welcome people's interest.

Dr. Dave: Good. Well is there anything that you'd like to say as we wrap up? Any last word?

Ann Weiser Cornell: Well what I've gathered from my journey with focusing, over 37 years, is that we can trust our own inner knowing. And what I love about my work is that I help people come to trust their inner knowing. So much of our culture has taken us away from ourselves and draws our attention out into outer authority, and takes us away from trusting ourselves. So let's come back to our birthright of trusting the inner knowing inside ourselves.

Dr. Dave: Well Dr. Ann Weiser Cornell, it's been delightful speaking with you. And thank you so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Ann Weiser Cornell: Thanks, it's been a pleasure.