

# Body Dreamwork

## Using Focusing to Find the Life Force Inherent in Dreams

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### ABSTRACT

Finding and embodying the life force or “help” in a dream is the central practice of focusing-oriented dreamwork. This article briefly introduces *focusing* (Gendlin, 1978/1981) and its application to dreamwork, and provides a case example with a transcript of how to guide a dreamer to find the life force in a distressing dream. The practice of embodying the dream’s life force provides the dreamer with an embodied resource that can be an end in itself, and can also facilitate working with the more challenging aspects of dreams and nightmares. Research and clinical examples support the use of this technique in clinical practice, and demonstrate how it can provide clinically significant relief from nightmare distress and other symptoms of PTSD.

*Keywords:* dreamwork, focusing, nightmares, embodiment, psychotherapy

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“A dream is alive,” according to Gendlin (2012), a philosopher and psychologist who developed the gentle somatic inquiry practice called *focusing* (1978/1981). He said that every dream contains life force—sometimes obvious and sometimes hidden—and that the main objective of working with dreams is to locate and embody this life force. This article describes how to do so, first by providing a brief introduction to focusing theory and practice and how it applies to dreamwork, then by grounding the theory through a clinical example of a dream that came to life. The article ends with a description of how to apply this approach to working with nightmares.

### A Brief Introduction to Focusing

Focusing is a particular way of sensing into the body with patient and friendly curiosity that enables us to find and follow an intricate *felt* sense that hovers on the edge between our current immediate experience and our body’s understanding of the right next step. In focusing, which is typically done in dyads, the listener guides the focuser through a series of simple steps to help them contact and inquire into their felt sense about a particular situation. Gendlin (1978/1981) wrote that the interaction between two human beings would inherently move the process forward, because the shared field between two people contains more awareness and wisdom than each alone. This “more” is what brings about tangible shifts that can lead to subtle or dramatic internal change.

Gendlin developed the focusing steps as a reliable way for people to access an inner process that he and Carl Rogers identified in their research as the key ingredient to success in psychotherapy. What characterizes this important inner process is direct, in-the-moment experiencing of one's internal sense of a situation, a fluctuating yet tangible knowledge that leads a person via their body's felt sense to a new vantage point. What clients often say after focusing is that the situation hasn't changed, but they have. To the patient, a familiar issue no longer feels as problematic, or now they feel they have a way to move forward.

Gendlin (1986) developed a method of working with dreams based on focusing, which he described in *Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams*. The book also contains one of the most accessible accounts of Gendlin's philosophy and its relationship to dreams. He wrote that a felt sense is "more than finished" (p. 146) because it contains both the present moment and the implied next steps. A dream, on the other hand, is unfinished, because it usually has less embodied presence. Thus, in many ways, the dream could still unfold. In Gendlin's philosophy, interaction is primary, and dreamwork is no exception. He wrote, "The step we want comes from the interaction between the dream and our responses. The dream alone need not be just 'believed'" (p. 148).

### Why Dreams Are Relevant

Focusing is based on an organic, optimistic philosophy. Like a plant that naturally extends toward the sun, our bodies interact with our environment in growth-producing ways. Gendlin (1986) said that "the living body implies its behaviors" (p. 152) and that dreams are expressions of this. Therefore, what is needed now—"what is un-lived or missing" (p. 155)—comes to us in dreams. The dream will stay alive and relevant for as long as the need continues, which explains why many dreams and/or dream themes recur. Gendlin wrote:

*"Just what you need"* can come in two ways. The dream's events may picture the need, lack or problem in how you live. More rarely, the dream pictures an answer, how you would live a step toward what is un-lived or missing. (p. 155)

Some dreams clearly point the way forward. More often, the solution comes from working with the dream, exploring its implications, and living the dream forward imaginably and experientially. When the dream already contains the way forward, Gendlin would say that the "missing un-lived wholeness" (p. 157) comes in the dream, intertwined with the dreamer's problem.

Some dream theorists believe that dreams serve no purpose whatsoever. Others believe that dreams do their work whether we engage with them or not. Still others, like Gendlin, believe that working further with dreams is the only way to reap their full benefit, because dreams are naturally in an unfinished state, dreamt by a body that is not fully awake and is not participating in life. His belief was that the dream brings an image of missing or un-lived wholeness, and that focusing brings the next step. *"Even when the step is in the dream, focusing is needed to let the whole, fully ongoing body take the step"* (p. 159).

### **Focusing Dreamwork: The Basic Steps**

This article is primarily about the step Gendlin (1986) called “finding the help” in a dream, which he considered the most important process of dreamwork. First, I provide a brief overview of the focusing-oriented dreamwork (FOD) process. I begin dreamwork as I would any focusing session, with *clearing a space*. This is especially true when working with nightmares, because I may want to invite a dreamer who is activated by their dream material to sense back into a calm inner space before exploring their distressing dream imagery. In clearing a space, I am anchoring an embodied resource to pick up on whether or not there is obvious “help” in the dream to accompany the dreamer into the darkest parts of their dreamscape.

To clear a space, you simply ask the client to get grounded and comfortable in their body and then to turn their attention to their inner space. If the client finds it a bit crowded or intense inside, their task is to gently set aside any distractions, sensations, or worries that prevent them from feeling calm, clear, and present. It usually takes just a few minutes, and it gently prepares the person to make the shift from the outer world to inner exploration. Clearing a space can be a helpful and calming process on its own.

Next, the client is asked to tell the dream in as much detail as possible, ideally in first person, and in present tense, as if they are back in the dream and re-experiencing it. If the person is reading from a dream journal, I often ask them to read it once to jog their memory and then to retell it experientially. I invite them to walk back through the dream landscape to see if they can bring themselves back into the atmosphere of the dream, to sense things, such as the smell of the air, the sounds, and the general mood. If the words on the dream journal page bring no real felt sense of the dream, it may be better to work with another dream that remains alive and responsive. The point is to interact with the dream, taking both dreamer and dream a step further.

Once the dreamer has felt their way back into the dreamscape, I first ask them to describe the setting using as many senses as possible. This is an easy place to begin, and it brings the client into deeper experiential contact with their dream. You can tell they are truly back inside the dream if new details and images emerge that were not in the original telling. You can also invite them to explore associations to the dream, but I generally allow these to emerge on their own rather than asking for them specifically, because my main interest is in maintaining connection with the dream itself. Associations can place the dream in a context, but also take the dreamer further from their dream.

### **Find the Life Force in the Dream**

Once the client has immersed themselves in the dream and has a strong felt sense of its unique environment, the first thing I do is begin a search for the life force or “help” that Gendlin believed was present in every dream. Often, the helpful places in the dream are obvious; you can watch for the places that energize or entrance the dreamer in their telling of the dream. New, living things, such as animals, plants, and children, are clearly sources of life force. Anything beautiful or highly unusual can be “help”, as well.

Sometimes, the dream is dark and dreary, or even terrifying, and it may seem impossible to uncover any source of new energy. Gendlin (1992) suggested that even in these dreams, there will be help, because the dream itself will supply what's needed to support and provide the resources the dreamer needs to process its more challenging aspects.

I think that if a dream brings an issue to work on, it also brings some help, some change in the usual set, something extra with positive energy – something, so that we don't just tackle a stuck issue in the way the person always does, and get stuck once more.... *Of course* we would expect such help from any novel, odd and very noticeable things that some dreams bring. For example, if there are two sculptured bowls, or some odd box with sticks coming out of it – or anything of that sort – of course we would attend to anything like that before we tackled the main issue. (p. 27)

Prior to learning about finding help, I tended to work through the dream in roughly chronological order. or to work with the most striking image first. Prioritizing the search for help has transformed my dreamwork process in a positive way. The focus on helping the dreamer locate and embody the dream's life force has made it possible for them to metabolize the dream in such a way that both dreamer and dream are changed in the process. In one unusual case (Ellis, 2019), the dreamer found help in an unlikely place in his dream. He dreamed that some miners were pushing a tube into a deep hole in the ground. The dreamer knew that the tube would explode and kill the miners, and this is exactly what happened. But as the miners were pushing down, something pushed back from deep in the earth. When I asked the dreamer where the most energy in the dream was for him, he said it was this counter-pressure from down deep, which he felt most strongly in his chest. This "push-back" feeling has become a touchstone in his life, and a place he relies on when he makes important decisions or needs to connect with himself in an authentic way.

I offer the following clinical example because it represents a dream in which finding the life force presented a challenge. Even the trees and the usual places one would find life did not seem to offer help to the dreamer at first. The dream title was given by the dreamer herself.

### **Japanese House Dream: The Power of Acknowledgement**

Dreamer: I am in a house by myself. This place is in some rural area in Japan. And I am sitting in this room knowing that there's a dead body under the floor. And then, it's strange to say, but the sense is that I've created it. I killed somebody, and I am hiding the dead body underneath the floor. I am so anxious and terrified that somebody will come and find it out. And the biggest thing is that the dream felt so real, I almost believed that I had actually killed somebody.

Therapist: It was so vivid and realistic that for a little while you couldn't differentiate between waking reality and dream life. The first thing I would ask now is: can you tell me a little bit more about this room that you're in... the setting of the dream where you find yourself? If you can, while you're doing that, go imaginatively into

this room, and look around so that as you describe it to me, it feels like you're actually in it.

Dreamer: Okay. It has a tatami mat, which is made of a special kind of grass. So I'm sitting right on top. And the air is rather humid. It's not cold or warm, but it's humid. This house has just one square room and some windows.

T: Okay, so it's a one-room house and you're sitting on this tatami mat... and just take another minute to see if there is anything more you can say about the place.

D: This place is old. The house is old. And as is typical in Japan, it's made of wood instead of bricks or concrete. And it's rather grayish. Not a vivid color at all. Very plain, no embellishment at all.

T: So it's stark, simple, gray. I get the picture. Now, I was wondering if it would be okay to embody the actual house.

D: (long pause) I feel quite solid and well-grounded. But it lacks warmth or joy.

T: Is it possible to get a sense of what's around the house? On the outside?

D: Lots of trees. Green. But it's not deciduous. It's evergreen—cedars or spruce—the kind of trees that grow very straight and tall. The green is rather dark, and those trees are all around the house. It's remote, not near a town at all.

T: How is it to have the house, which is kind of stark and grayish and plain, to have that intensity of color around, the green and the tall trees? Is there a feeling around the atmosphere outside?

D: Not really. There's no sunshine. It's more like misty gray. And a sense that the place is nowhere, not even on the map.

T: Can you get a felt sense of the whole house, and the atmosphere around it, but not anything specific inside?

D: So the sense of the whole house... There's no freshness in this place, no sense of life, other than the trees around it. And the mat is rather sticky and it's not soft at all. It doesn't give me any sense of comfort.

T: Okay. The mat is not comfortable. Is there anything about that, anything it reminds you of? Something old and unchanging?

D: It's been always there. And I don't like it. I want to get rid of it. Because it's a smoky old stale feeling. Now I'm getting a sense of the house as a body, like a body functioning, a feeling like when I was a child. Wow, a lot of feeling comes with it.

T: Does that sound right to you that the house could be kind of representative of the body?

D: Yeah.

(This is one of those dreams where it's tricky to find a solid sense of help. But I would say that the feeling of being solid and grounded was probably the most resourced place. Before I move on to inquire into the image of the dead body, I ask the dreamer to embody the only sense so far that seems to offer help. Even the trees here seemed unpromising.)

T: So I would invite you now to start by embodying that feeling of being grounded, solid like the house, just to feel that in your body, and get a sense of that. (pause) And then, just bring your attention to this body that you know is under the floorboards that is somehow related to something you did or created. And I'm wondering if you can, in your imagination, go and visit underneath, go and see who that is or what that is. Or if there's anything you can find out about who or what has died here.

D: (long pause) The first image came to me was my own child. Even though I have never had a child, and was never pregnant. The next image that comes to me is of my mother. She is in a care facility and I am wondering how long her life is going to continue. When things get rough, sometimes I wonder when she might depart to the other side. And I feel that thought itself is morally so wrong. So I kind of bury that. I really love her, but a little bit deeper down is a sense that maybe when she goes, then I could relax and do what I need to do for my own self.

T: I see there is a lot of feeling around that. Lots of feeling. And those feelings are so forbidden in a way. You're describing really loving your mother and also that you're taking care of her and sometimes you wonder when she might depart. There's a feeling like that's not an acceptable thought to have. Some part of you feels like oh, that's not morally right. And so I'm wondering if you can, just for now, gently put that critical voice aside and just let yourself really feel into these buried thoughts, just being curious. I'm inviting you to feel into where it's okay to be curious about when your mother might depart. It's a transition that is inevitable, so maybe it's reasonable to wonder about this and see what happens if you just give that a little more welcoming space.

(This is classic focusing language, inviting the client to be friendly with their difficult feelings, creating friendlier internal relations, and putting a little distance between the person and their felt sense.)

D: I feel like I'm sitting beside it and now it feels okay to have that sense. Because I've been working so hard, and it's not easy at all. And I understand. So I can be very compassionate toward myself.

T: So when you sit beside it, you can be compassionate; it's okay to have that thought. It's been hard and you have worked hard. And you can be in a place where you are compassionate with whatever sorts of thoughts come up around this. They're perfectly understandable, acceptable. And I noticed the tears, and I wonder if you can just sit in this dream space, just with that compassion for yourself. And from there, look around the dream room with the tatami mat, the little one-room house with the trees around it, and the feeling like there's a dead body under the floorboards... just to see what's there when you visit it now.

D: Now I can open the window and let the fresh air flow in. And now I can hear the birds chirping and smell the green trees.

T: Hmm. So you're letting in all of the life that surrounds you. It doesn't feel so stale. Now there is fresh air and birds and the trees; now you can feel the life in them.

D: I do think I've come to life. And also that I'm not ready to open the box. But it's more comfortable sitting on top of it. Yeah. It feels very different. A lot more comfortable.

The dreamer said she was intrigued that she was able to experientially enter this dream from about two years ago to find that she could experience it anew, and find such relevance for her current life. Some dreams stay alive like this and can be worked with again and again. Our biggest dreams may remain relevant throughout our lifetime.

### **Further Experiential Steps**

The dreamer clearly experienced what in focusing is called a felt shift, a completely different embodied sense of the dream. It was not a coincidence that the dream itself changed too, and became more infused with life. Gendlin would say that this would be a fine place to leave the dreamwork and that this dreamer did seem content to leave it there. She said she was “not ready to open the box.” However, after such a shift, further exploration can feel easier and is more likely to be constructive. Bolstered by an embodiment of the help a dream brings, the dreamer is generally more able to venture into the dream's challenging aspects. From here, there are many experiential steps that one can take. Gendlin (1986) offered 16 questions one can ask of a dream. They are available in his book or in the Gendlin online library at [http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol\\_2169.html](http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2169.html) with instructions about how to use each step.

Here I will discuss the two experiential steps I tend to use most often. Gendlin (1986) said all of the 16 questions are meant to be brought into the body, not pondered in the mind. “The interpretation comes inside the dreamer or not at all.... Only the dreamer's body can interpret the dream” (p. 25). However, I would suggest that questions 8: being the dream element and 9: continuing the dream are the inquiries that most naturally take the dreamer into a deeper, more embodied experiencing of their dream. You can see in the above example that I invited the dreamer to be the house, to enter into its subjectivity, and to feel the groundedness it initially brought

her. Interestingly, she felt the house to be a body analogy, something Gendlin suggests as an avenue of exploration in question 11.

### **Being a Dream Element**

The process of entering into the subjectivity of a dream figure or object originates with the Gestalt practice pioneered by Perls (1969/1992). He believed that everything in the dream was an aspect of the dreamer, and that by embodying these elements, the dreamer could “re-assimilate and re-own the alienated parts of ourselves” (p. 96). You may or may not ascribe to Gestalt theory. It is possible to view this process quite differently, to enter foreign dream elements because they bring a sense of other that expands our sense of self (Ellis, 2013). The process itself trumps theory; my sense is that it’s valuable to try on this practice like a new suit of clothes, and just see what comes.

In one clinical example, a client brought a dream about a dark landscape littered with dead bodies. In it, a woman sat at the head of one of the bodies and in tending to it, brought it back to life. The dreamer seemed surprisingly neutral about the gruesome scene and was even able to embody the corpse without feeling very much. But then, when I asked her to sense into the dream from the perspective of the healer, she was overcome with sadness. Clearly there were distressing feelings present in the dream; it was a matter of finding and releasing them. Sometimes the emotion is carried by figures or objects quite apart from the dream ego, and also outside of what one might consider the inherent logic of the situation. Dream logic clearly differs from the rules of the daytime world.

Hillman (1979) wrote, “We cannot understand a dream until we enter it,” p. 80. While this may not be true of every dream, I have found that the practice of entering a dream element is particularly helpful with those aspects of the dream that remain stubbornly mysterious. Frightening elements become a bit more familiar and therefore less scary. The purpose or meaning of strange objects becomes clearer. For example, I dreamed about swimming with a gnarly stick, and although it provided a bit of flotation, it definitely slowed my progress. Embodying the stick brought many ideas about it; the most powerful was that although it was going to take me longer, I would ultimately go further if I took it with me because it provided a bit of flotation and some company on my journey.

### **Dreaming the Dream Onward**

I will conclude this article with one of the most powerful experiential steps one can take in working with dreams—that of re-entering the dream and allowing it to continue. I will discuss this step with respect to working with nightmares for the following reasons: these are the dreams where finding and embodying the life force in a dream might seem impossible; nightmares warrant the greatest clinical attention because they coincide with many challenging diagnoses; and, because nightmares are often treatable, though few people seek therapeutic help for them.

A version of dreaming the dream onward, an idea that originated with Jung, has become the most highly recommended non-pharmaceutical treatment for nightmares by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) is the simple practice of asking the nightmare sufferer to change their dream in any way

they wish, and to rehearse this change before going to sleep. Two large randomized, controlled clinical trials showed its effectiveness (Krakow et al., 2000, 2001), and considerable research in the past 20 years has supported and expanded upon this method. In short, the idea of imagining a new dream ending has become standard accepted practice in the treatment of nightmares.

Many people ask if it's a good idea to focus on the harrowing content a nightmare brings up. To this, I always offer the following quote from Gendlin (1978/1981):

What is true is already so. Owning up to it doesn't make it worse. Not being open about it doesn't make it go away. And because it's true, it is what is there to be interacted with. Anything untrue isn't there to be lived. People can stand what is true, for they are already enduring it. (p. 162)

A recent study of the nightmares of Auschwitz survivors supports this idea. Owczarski (2018) analyzed more than 500 dreams of 127 former inmates and concluded that most of their dreams were adaptive on their own or had "therapeutic potential." Only 10 percent of the dreams were recurrent, repetitive dreams that replayed actual trauma memories. Most had begun to weave in present experiences or were metaphorical representations of the experience. Owczarski found that while not all of the dreams of the Auschwitz survivors had therapeutic effects by themselves, "all of them seem useful and healing in psychotherapy, so suggesting patients repress their dreams would turn out to be a serious mistake" (p. 300).

My research using FOD to treat the recurrent nightmares of refugees with PTSD (Ellis, 2016a) led to a similar conclusion. After treatment, even long-term, recurring nightmares began to shift toward more healthy dreaming, and coincided with a 50 percent reduction in PTSD symptoms. So the question is not whether to work with such dreams, but how?

### **What If No "Help" Can Be Found?**

Even in the worst nightmares, there can be glimmers of help. For example, in the first dream presented here, there was a general gloom but also a solidness in the Japanese house. And in the dream littered with corpses, there was a person bringing one of them back to life. If a nightmare has begun to weave in elements from the present or can be understood as metaphorical, this marks the beginning of trauma recovery, and those elements that depart from the actual trauma event are clear sources of help.

If a dream has no light in it whatsoever, then the help in the dream is not present but implied in its continuation. The refugees in my study, for example, often dreamed of the worst moment in their traumatic history, such as the time and place where they feared for their lives or their children's lives. Yet these resilient people clearly had escaped that fate, and in suggesting they dream the dream onward, they could incorporate into their dreams the events that happened next. In imagining their successful escape or rescue, they were allowing their unconscious to catch up with actual life events, and it is these kinds of changes that were then incorporated into their dreams. In general, they moved toward the more active end of the threat response continuum, from freeze to flight to fight. Over a longer period of time, the threat can

dissipate further, and dreamers may begin to interact with their aggressors, who then often change into something less threatening.

To keep the process safe and aligned with the principles of good trauma work, I begin such sessions with the practice of clearing a space. When the process becomes difficult, I invite the dreamer to revisit the calmness of the cleared space before continuing to explore the nightmare. The process can be challenging, but the results are usually welcome. In my study, and in general, nightmare distress is reduced, as are the other PTSD symptoms of memory intrusion and flashbacks.

To give a case example, a woman from Congo dreamed repeatedly of the moment she feared her attackers would kill her. In dreaming the dream on, she imagined a man helping her escape to a safe place, which is what truly happened. After this, she stopped having the nightmare. In another example (Ellis, 2016b), a client experienced a similar nightmare almost every night, of being pursued through a series of rooms in a tall building. She would always end up trapped and terrified, certain of her capture and torture. In her imagined new ending, she was able to become invisible and escape. Then, within the dreaming, she developed what she called her superpowers: the ability to vanish or to fly. This coincided with a dramatic reduction in the distress caused by her dreams, because the fear was largely replaced by excitement.

## Conclusion

Finding help in a dream is a powerful, embodied experiential dreamwork practice that provides a focus for the process of dream exploration and allows the dreamer to embody resources that make their further exploration possible and more constructive. Even in dreams where no apparent help can be found, finding and embodying the dream's life force can be achieved by anchoring an inner resource of calm, and then allowing a frightening dream to continue toward a resolution. This practice not only improves dream life, but also coincides with positive changes that extend to the dreamer's waking. It can be a particularly helpful way to work with nightmares and related symptoms.



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