

## Changing the Focus

By David D. Burns, MD<sup>1</sup>

Changing the Focus is one of the three advanced communication techniques. You focus on what's going on in your interaction with someone instead of continuing to argue. It will only be effective if you have a strong desire to improve your relationship with that person, and if you are willing to change the way you respond to him or her, as opposed to blaming and trying to change the other person.

However, if not done skillfully, Changing the Focus (like all methods) will fail big time! in addition, you will need to be expert in the Five Secrets of Effective Communication, especially the Disarming Technique, before adding Changing the Focus to your toolbox.

Think about Changing the Focus when you notice that you're uncomfortable with someone you aren't getting along with. Indicate which feelings come up for you most frequently when you interact with that person.

<b>Your Feelings</b>				
<b>Instructions.</b> Use ticks (√) to indicate which feelings come up for you most frequently when interacting with the other person.	0—Never	1—Rarely	2— Sometimes	3—Often
1. Sad, down, unhappy				
2. Anxious, worried, insecure, frightened				
3. Guilty, ashamed				
4. Inadequate, incompetent, inferior				
5. Alone, unwanted, rejected, abandoned				
6. Embarrassed, self-conscious, humiliated				
7. Discouraged, hopeless, demoralized				
8. Frustrated, thwarted, stuck, defeated				
9. Angry, upset, annoyed, irritated				
10. Hurt				
11. Criticized, put down, judged				
12. Bored, unengaged, disinterested				
13. Trapped, pressured				
14. Overwhelmed, burdened				
15. Jealous, mistrustful				
16. Other feelings (describe):				

On the next page, you'll find a list of the kinds of patterns that can trigger your negative feelings. Tick off the ones that you've encountered most frequently.

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**Upsetting Behaviors**  
The other person (tick off all that apply)—

	(√)
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1. Will not stop talking	
2. Will not listen to you	
3. Criticizes you relentlessly	
4. Seems afraid to criticize you or tell you how s/he really feels	
5. Argues and always has to be right	
6. Blames you	
7. Cries or acts hurt when you try to criticize him / her	
8. Is stubborn or controlling and always has to get his /her way	
9. Is often late for meetings with you	
10. Complains, but won't listen to your good advice	
11. Claims that you don't care when you think you do care	
12. Seems bored or boring	
13. Seems to avoid you	
14. Constantly brags, boasts, or one-ups you	
15. Judges you or puts you down	
16. Acts superior	
17. Intellectualize without expressing emotion	
18. Gives you the silent treatment / refuses to open up	
19. Constantly ask for advice or wants you to make decisions for them	
20. Acts needy or helpless	
21. Is mean to you, or insensitive, or belittles you	
22. Gets agitated, angry, or upset when you try to make him or her accountable.	
23. Has negative body language, like scowling or frowning, arms crossed across the chest, or shaking his or her head as if to say, "you're wrong!"	
24. Is jealous or possessive or controlling	

If you can think of some other common patterns, feel free to list them here:

25.	
26.	
27.	

If you want things to improve, you will need to use the Five Secrets of Effective Communication in any of these situations. But the unique feature of Changing the Focus is that you bring the logjam to conscious awareness in a gentle and non-blaming manner. As a general principle, the problematic pattern requires secrecy to remain alive and well. Once you bring it to conscious awareness in a skillful and respectful way, it typically loses much or all of its negative power.

Here's an example of Changing the Focus. Let's take the first pattern on the list—the other person will not stop talking. You could say something like this:

"Jim, one of the really great things about you is that you always have so much to say, and a lot of the things you talk about are really interesting. However, I've noticed that I have trouble engaging in the conversation, and sometimes feel a little bit shut out, so I start to lose track of what we're talking about, and things get kind of one-sided. This isn't really fair to you, because we don't have much chance to engage in dialogue together, and I feel a bit shut out, too.

"I wonder, too, if I haven't been a good listener in the past, so perhaps you feel you better talk when you've got the chance.

"Have you noticed this lack of dialogue between us as well? Tell me what this has been like for you."

What you say has to be genuine, and this is just an example. If you don't think that some of the things Jim is saying are interesting, you can't say that. Instead, you might put it like this instead: "and a lot of the things you talk about could be really interesting." But the important thing is to express yourself in a kindly way, so the other person does not lose face or feel judged, criticized, or rejected.

And, as I point out at the start, this is all based on the idea that you do want a better relationship with the other person!

When I'm in a conflict with someone, I try to remind myself that the problem can be a golden opportunity to develop a more rewarding relationship with that person. For example, a patient recently criticized me and said that he didn't really trust me, that I sometimes seemed "too slick." He added that he'd been conned by many therapists who were just trying to promote something, and didn't seem genuine.

I told him that I'd been uncomfortable, too, and that I actually dreaded talking to him because I felt like I was failing him and not really connecting with him. I confessed that I'd had a restless night thinking about it, and felt really badly, and that maybe this would be an opportunity for us to connect on a deeper and more genuine level. I told him I really wanted to hear how he'd been feeling.

He began crying and confessed how incredibly lonely he was, and I suddenly felt a wave of relief and compassion. Our relationship has been terrific ever since!

I try to remind myself that the attempt to solve the problem IS the problem, and the refusal to solve the problem is nearly always the solution. What this means in practical, simple terms is that's important to focus on feelings—your own and the other person's feelings—using the Five Secrets of Effective Communication—and to avoid trying to fix things or to figure out who's "right" or who's to blame.

Here's one way to think about it. You and the other person are involved in a non-productive pattern of arguing, avoiding feelings, or fighting for control—or some other pattern. For example, you may be arguing because you both think that you are "right," and you may feel like it's terribly important to make your point and "win" the

argument. But the argument can probably never be won. The more you argue and defend yourself, the more the other person escalates his or her criticisms of you. I'm sure you've noticed that!

Underneath the intellectual debate, there is a river of emotions—the other person's feelings and your own feelings. So instead of remaining on the surface, and continuing to argue about the intellectual content, you dip into the river of emotions, using the Five Secrets of Effective Communication, so you can bring the feelings to conscious awareness. You encourage respectful dialogue about the pattern that has emerged.

You will need to do this delicately and deliberately. You can overtly pause the conversation about the content of the conversation so you can shift the focus onto the dynamic, or pattern, between the two of you, with an attitude of curiosity, respect, caring, and joint discovery.

Changing the Focus is one of the most difficult communication techniques, even for therapists. Many people, and this likely includes you, seem intimidated by talking about feelings, and feel intensely phobic about any potential failure in their relationship with colleagues, friends, or loved ones. Perhaps this is similar to the phobia so many people seem to have about acknowledging anger. It's the idea, I guess, that if we ignore the problem it will go away.

### **How do you do Changing the Focus?**

Step 1. Notice that you're uncomfortable.

Step 2. Notice that you may prefer to ignore your discomfort, hoping it will go away if you ignore it!

Step 3. Ask the other person if you could comment for a moment on some tension or awkwardness you sense, kind of like there's an elephant in the room.

Step 4. Assuming the other person says yes, mention that you've been feeling a little awkward, and ask the other person if s/he has been feeling uncomfortable, too.

Step 5. Use the Five Secrets of Effective Communication when the other person says how s/he has been feeling.

Step 6. Try to describe the pattern you sense, taking full blame yourself, and making sure the other person does not feel blamed or criticized. For example, you might say, "I've notice that you want to talk, and I feel like I'm having a hard time telling you how I'm thinking and feeling. I'm really worried that I haven't done a good job of listening to you. Have you sensed that as well?"

Step 7. Continue the dialogue using the Five Secrets of Effective Communication.

Remember to avoid blame. Convey the idea that this dialogue might feel a bit uncomfortable, but it can enhance our relationship and improve the quality of our relationship.

### **How to Fail with this Changing the Focus**

It's super easy to fail with this technique if you don't do it skillfully, and with respect.

**Ineffective example.** Suppose you feel criticized by your spouse, so you say:

"Helen, I feel like you're being really critical of me."

This will almost definitely fail because you're blaming Helen for criticizing you. She will probably say, "That's because you're not listening!"

**Effective example.** Here's another way of saying the same thing:

"Helen, I notice that we've been arguing a lot lately. You've been critical of me, and I've been getting defensive. Then things escalate, and I think we both end up feeling hurt, frustrated, and ticked off. I really

love you, and think I've been arguing instead of listening to what you've been trying to tell me, and I wouldn't be surprised if you're feeling hurt, too. Tell me if you've noticed this pattern, and what it's been like for you."

This statement has a much better chance of a friendly response because you're acknowledging your own feelings and asking how the other person is feeling instead of blaming or insisting that s/he is wrong. But to do this, you have to know how to use the Disarming Technique, as well as the other effective communication techniques. And you also have to have a strong desire to develop a more loving relationship instead of arguing and trying to "win."

### Examples

**#1:** When I was a psychiatric resident, I transferred from Highland Hospital in Oakland, California, to the University of Pennsylvania residency program in Philadelphia. Since the new program was very highly rated, I imagined that my fellow psychiatric residents would be enormously smart and accomplished, so I felt a "less than." During seminars, I found myself criticizing the professors and trying to show that their theories or therapy approaches weren't really valid. I guess I was trying to impress the other residents with how smart I was.

After one of the classes when I was walking across the campus, one of the residents began walking next to me, and said, "You know David, you seem rally smart, but it sometimes seems like you use your mind as a weapon."

That really stung, because I immediately realized that he was right, and I felt foolish and ashamed.

Essentially, he was using Changing the Focus. He wasn't arguing with anything I'd said; instead, he was simply focusing on my one-upsmanship, which was uncomfortable for him, and likely for many others in the class as well. He was talking about the process, and not the content. I felt hurt, but I didn't feel put down or unfairly demeaned, because he'd said this in a very respectful way, and he was absolutely right.

**#2:** Early in my practice I was treating a newly married couple who had both been divorced. The man, James, had five children from his previous marriage, and was 12 years older than his new wife, Janine. Janine had no children. Janine was desperate to have a child before she turned 40, but James was tired of raising children and didn't want any more.

They argued about this endlessly. James would argue for his point of view, and Janine would argue for hers. Both were convinced they were "right" and the other person was "wrong."

I pointed out that no one would ever win this argument, and that the real problem was that they were arguing and trying to "win," instead of listening and supporting each other. I coached them in using listening skills—trying to see things through the eyes of the other person, and acknowledging his or her feelings, and find truth in what he or she was saying, and expressing warmth and love in spite of how frustrated and angry they both felt. The idea was to STOP trying to win this argument. Specifically, I taught them the "One Minute Drill."

They take turns talking, while the other listens, and then summarizes what the partner just said and how s/he feels. The goal is accurate listening, and providing support, as opposed to "winning" the argument. They agreed to practice this every day for 15 minutes.

At their next session, three weeks later, James reported that something strange had happened. He woke up one morning and realized how much he loved Janine, and said he'd changed his mind and wanted to have a baby, too! Soon, she was pregnant, and later gave birth to a beautiful baby daughter. The daughter proved to be a tremendous source of comfort and support to both of them.

That's what I mean when I say, "The attempt to solve the problem IS the problem, and the refusal to solve it is the solution."

**#3.** I once treated a brilliant psychologist who had intense test phobia before her certification examination. Her anxiety resulted from her negative thoughts. She was so paralyzed with fear that she'd been totally unable to study for the examination.

She was telling herself things like this:

1. I know I'll flunk the exam.
2. They'll only ask about things I *don't* know, and won't have any questions about the things I *do* know.
3. It's unfair!

These thoughts were all pretty distorted because she was a top graduate student in a top program, and had never flunked test in her entire life, so failing, while possible, was not likely. In addition, it would be impossible for the exam to contain questions only about things she didn't know. Still, when I encouraged her to challenge these thoughts, she argued with me and debated. And since I like to debate, I got sucked right into the pattern of arguing during our sessions.

Then I suddenly realized what was going on, and said something like this:

"Annie, have you noticed how we're arguing during the sessions, and that I'm not really helping you, and we're not really working together as a team? You're actually super smart, and you're one of my favorite people to debate with, but I'm also feeling sad because I'm not doing a good job as a therapist, and your exam is coming up really soon. Have you noticed that also? I think I have to take the blame, because I'm arguing with you instead of listening to how angry and anxious and panicked you've been feeling. And there's a lot of truth in your negative thoughts, too. The exam has, in fact, been criticized for not being terribly valid or reliable, and lots of people do fail the first time they take it, even very smart people."

She agreed, and I changed my therapeutic strategy and my way of interacting with her. This allowed us to get on the same page, and she was quickly able to crush her negative thoughts and overcome her fears. Then she started studying, which she actually enjoyed. Several weeks later she passed the test with flying colors, and, in fact, had one of the highest scores in the state.

**#4.** My colleague, Dr. Rhonda Barovsky, told me that she accidentally double-booked two patients recently. She apologized and asked one of them to come back the following week, and offered him a free session.

When he came back he was really upset. Rhonda responded with the Five Secrets of Effective Communication, which included telling him that she was embarrassed and really angry with herself for letting him down. Because we had been talking about a podcast on Changing the Focus, she also asked her patient if he'd ever experienced people letting him down in his life before this happened.

She said, "This led to the best session ever, with him discussing all of the times he felt let down by various people in his life."