

INTEGRATING FOCUSING WITH THE EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPIES AND MINDFULNESS

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The roots of integrating Focusing, expressive arts and mindfulness begins with my personal experience of each practice, evolves into applying the processes as a psychotherapist with others in a variety of settings, and culminates in developing both a theoretical and practice framework that is now recognized in other fields. My hope is that this article will reflect the ways that Focusing is a living process within each of us, how it is present within the actions of what we do, and how it can be developed and integrated with other life activities to enhance meaning and access to our inner wisdom. Additionally, my intention is that this article will elucidate how listening to the felt sense will unfold and offer a step that unfolds into other steps over time, deepening the synthesis of Focusing with other interests in life.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

I was first introduced to Focusing as a client in psychotherapy, 36 years ago in 1977. I didn't know that my therapist was doing something that is now named, "Focusing-Oriented Therapy." All I knew is that at specific moments, when I was on the edge of a feeling or something meaningful that I couldn't quite grasp, she would gently lower her eyes, point toward her chest, and say the following words to me: "Can you sense how that feels inside?"

As I listened inwardly, a sense of space opened up, time slowed down, and my eyes naturally lowered and closed. I waited, and often an image would arise. Sometimes a kinesthetic gesture would come, or just the right word or phrase that matched something within that was lying dormant. I later learned that Focusing describes this as *listening to my "felt sense"*—and that a word, phrase, image, gesture, or sound can serve as a symbol or "*handle*" for the felt sense (Gendlin, 1981). At times the felt sense was about something painful, sad, hurting, or angry; other times it was about joyful experiences; and other times it was simply clarifying content that was not emotional but rather a decision or topic I was struggling with. While this process in therapy felt new, after a few times of doing it, I had an inner sense of knowing that something about it was familiar. It then clicked—there was something similar in this process of Focusing that occurred when I created art as a form of self-expression and inquiry.

Eight years prior to this therapy experience, while still in high school, I discovered the healing power of creating art by listening within. After coming home from school, I would go into my room, close the door, and eventually sit down on the floor. Somehow, there was a sketchpad and charcoal sticks. During those teenage years of searching to discover "Who am I?" and "What is the meaning in life?", I gently closed my eyes and sat meditatively. After a couple of minutes, my awareness dropped into my body, where eventually an image

would arise. It was not a mental image formed in my mind but rather an image that emerged from a felt sense, and emerged most often from the inside of my body, typically on the inside in the trunk area between my neck and pelvis. I developed this image into visual art. As I created art, I noticed that the image connected to something important and deep within me, and the artistic process carried the experience further. I always felt better after drawing, even if the images reflected pain and suffering.

My awareness of the interconnections between Focusing and art continued to grow throughout my graduate studies in Expressive Arts Therapy and has continued as a clinician for over 30 years. During this same time period of time, I have pursued meditation training and investigation into various spiritual traditions. Similarly, during meditation, I noticed particular qualities and states of being that are resonant with what happens while Focusing and engaging in the arts. The rich crossing of Focusing, expressive arts, and mindfulness is further explained below.

CROSSING FOCUSING, EXPRESSIVE ARTS AND MINDFULNESS

Clinical Application

Once I began to learn Focusing during the same time period of graduate training in the expressive arts, I sensed that Gendlin's Focusing model of six steps (Gendlin 1981) could be integrated with the expressive arts and applied clinically. The first population that I tried it out with was with adults in a psychiatric day treatment center in 1979. I invited the group to begin with Clearing a Space. Instead of the usual guiding within the body with eyes closed, I offered the clients an art journal, and asked them to begin by writing down anything in the way of being "*all fine*" *right now*. I chose this approach since most of the clients suffered from psychosis, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and schizo-affective disorder. Most of the clients would often be overwhelmed with thoughts or feelings, and at times, not be able to discern "what was real," or how to ground themselves. Inviting the clients to begin by using the traditional Focusing invitation of "going inside" seemed too threatening.

During this time, I was grateful to read several articles that addressed Focusing with a similar population: "Therapeutic procedures with schizophrenic patients" (Gendlin 1972) and "Teaching the very confused how to make sense: an experiential approach to modular training with psychotics" (Egendorf and Jacobson, 1982). I was relieved to see that Gendlin also didn't do "regular" Focusing—but rather did a great deal of listening, keeping company with the client, and being present. He wasn't inviting them to sit, close their eyes and proceed with the six Focusing steps that he developed to teach people Focusing (i.e. 1. clear a space; 2. felt sense; 3. handle/symbol; 4. resonate 5. ask and 6. receive; Gendlin 1981).

The journals were effective. Clients liked writing things down and were able to discover things beyond their habitual ways of noticing their issues. Once the issues were written down, I then guided the group: "Keeping the issues that you just wrote down separate, now turn the page to a nice clear page. Sense how it feels to leave the issues on the other page, and take a little vacation from them. See how it feels in your body when you have some distance from those issues. Now, see if there are colors, shapes, or images that match the felt sense

inside of how the “all fine place” feels. When you’re ready, use the art materials to create an image. If a word or phrase comes, feel free to add that, too.”

I was amazed at the images of well-being that emerged. Most of the clients reported feeling energized, calm, peaceful, and happier. Sometimes we just did Clearing a Space. Other times, I guided the group through the rest of the Focusing steps: choose an issue, draw how it feels (felt sense and handle/symbol), resonate, ask it a question (e.g. “what does it need?”), and write an answer that comes to you. It was clear that the combination of writing and art accessed their felt sense—unfolding the body’s wisdom. The journal provided a safe container while the writing and art helped to carry their experience in a *life forward* direction. As I continued to know the clients, and as they began to feel safer with their inner experience, I was eventually able to guide them in a way where they felt they were able to close their eyes, listen to their bodily felt sense, symbolize what they were experiencing through writing, art, creative movement, and music or sound.

Excited about this combination of Focusing with the expressive arts, I wanted to share this approach with others. Ann Weiser Cornell welcomed my writing two articles for her newsletter, *The Focusing Connection*. The first article, ‘Focusing and Art Therapy,’ provided a means for me to articulate this powerful interconnection (Rappaport, 1988). In this article I demonstrated how art could be used to symbolize a *felt sense* and *felt shift*, and how visual art could be used with Gendlin’s Focusing steps. The second article, described how I integrated creative movement and art with Focusing to reduce stress (Rappaport, 1993). During that era, programs, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction, were not widely known—or, if they were, the information was not easily accessed as it was before the instant information access of the internet and search engines like Google. I simply listened to my own felt sense of what this population needed, and inwardly “heard” ways to try things out.

After working in the day treatment center, I started a psychotherapy practice. This is where I began to integrate the principles and practices of Focusing-Oriented Therapy (FOT). I was grateful when Gendlin’s book, *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy* came out in 1996, as it addressed many important aspects of integrating Focusing into therapy. He also had chapters that addressed role-play, and dance-movement therapy that were useful for my work in integrating Focusing with the arts. (I had also read earlier articles on Focusing with movement and poetry in earlier editions of the *Focusing Folio*). I continued to try out using Focusing, the expressive arts, and mindfulness with a wide variety of clients—adults, adolescents, children, couples, families, groups—with a range of issues, such as depression, anxiety, trauma, chronic and terminal illnesses, communication challenges, and personal growth. I also applied Focusing and the expressive arts in relation to organizational development and staff training. In all of these instances, there were no guide-books. It took trusting—of both my felt sense and the space of the not-yet-known.

Conferences, Workshops and Teaching

I was excited by this combination and felt that Focusing offered the expressive arts field something that was missing, and the expressive arts offered something to Focusing. To bring this information to both fields, I began presenting workshops at conferences and developed courses for teaching in graduate training programs.

Bringing Expressive Arts to Focusing

To begin sharing this crossing of Focusing and the expressive arts, I presented a workshop on Focusing and Art Therapy at the Focusing International Conference in 1996. I remember at the end of the workshop, Marta Stapert, a Focusing Coordinator and pioneer of the Children's Focusing Corner, said that she learned something new about applying art with Focusing. Last year I communicated with Marta to find out what she learned, as I was interested in the history of art therapy within the Focusing community. An excerpt from the email that I sent to her said: *"I have been wanting to mention the history of the application of Focusing with art and include something about when you attended my workshop in Boston. It feels important as part of its "crossing." Would you feel ok to write something from that experience?"*

Marta described various influences about the crossing of Focusing and art, including the following:

"In 1988 Laury Rappaport wrote in The Focusing Connection Vol. V, no. 3, May, FOCUSING AND ART THERAPY. This was for me encouraging and confirming how symbolization by creative means was another way in Focusing next to the verbal expression."

Marta further elaborated her experience after attending the Focusing International Conference in Gloucester, MA (she had attended three workshops that connected Focusing with art):

"Laury Rappaport gave a workshop on 'Focusing and art'. After her introduction, Laury guided us into a Focusing experience. We were invited to express ourselves from the felt sense on paper. Laury guided us to stay with our symbolization and to keep working on it in an artistic way. It was to me a surprise that more experiences came up from this deepening process. Afterwards I reflected with Laury about my experience: 'My discovery about this expressive process is that inviting the Focuser to be with the symbolization in a more extensive, artistic way through accompanying by the Focusing therapist or guide, can carry the process forward in a deeper and more profound way than merely drawing.'"

I share this exchange to help illustrate the ways that the felt sense of crossing Focusing with art began as something within me, unfolded further through clinical application, and how both writing and presenting at conferences and other workshops can help to carry the work forward.

I continued presenting various approaches to integrating Focusing, the expressive arts therapies, and mindfulness at both the Focusing International and the Focusing-Oriented Therapy World Conference. Many Focusers told me how much they appreciated learning how the felt sense could easily be expressed through the arts. They learned how natural it is for a felt sense 'handle' or symbol to unfold into creative expression—an image into art;

gesture into movement; sound into music and voice; and a word or phrase into a poem or creative writing. The expressive arts provide a means to externalize the felt sense.

Bringing Focusing to Expressive Arts

When I learned Focusing, not just as a client but as a trainee in Focusing, I began to see how it enhanced my clinical skills as an expressive arts therapist. While I had exceptional training in using the arts in therapy, Focusing filled in the following missing pieces:

- *Focusing attitude of being “friendly,” curious, and accepting:* The expressive arts are known for fostering greater acceptance. A saying is, “It’s not about the product (what it looks like or how it sounds) but the process.” The Focusing attitude deepens acceptance toward the inner felt sense. I learned how to invite clients to be “friendly” toward their inner experience. If their art expression was of rage, I could say, “Can you be curious about it?” Or “Can you be friendly to that place of rage within you?”
- *Expressive arts from the felt sense:* Through Focusing I learned how to guide clients to take a moment to notice their felt sense—to see if there’s a word, image, gesture or sound that matched their felt sense. Once they received the handle/symbol, I invited them to express the handle/symbol through the arts. This was a different approach than most expressive arts exercises. Typically an art therapist might say, “Draw your fear.” At times, clients can simply proceed and draw their fear. Other times clients go blank—and are not aware of their fear. They sometimes feel forced to come up with something about their fear. Focusing taught me to help clients take time to listen inwardly and to wait...allowing time for a felt sense to form. A Focusing invitation to explore fear might be: “Take a moment to become aware of a fear...(pause). Sense inside the whole feel of the fear...(pause). See if there’s a word, phrase, image, gesture or sound that matches the felt sense of the fear...When you have it, feel free to express it through an art form that feels right.” With clients who may have first been able to draw their fear when simply asked to draw it, Focusing often brings something fresh and *not yet known* that was meaningful to know.
- *Focusing after expressive arts:* As I incorporated Focusing after the expressive arts, I began to notice that it provided benefits for clients. It gave me a way to guide clients to notice what they had experienced from the arts expression. Sometimes, Focusing helped the client to access the meaning of their artistic expression. Other times it helped them to feel more grounded after becoming absorbed in the creative process.
- *Listening:* Ever since learning Focusing as both a client and trainee, I gained a deeper appreciation for skillful, experiential listening as an integral part of the process. In expressive arts training, we may learn listening skills, but my Focusing training taught me a very exquisite way of attuning to the client’s unfolding experiential process in a way that helped to weave a seamless exploration and interaction of felt sense, artistic expression, listening, and the therapeutic relationship.

While I was bringing the expressive arts to the Focusing community through workshops, conferences, and publications, I also introduced Focusing to the expressive arts therapies professions. I designed a 3 credit graduate course for Lesley University entitled,

“Focusing and the Expressive Therapies.” The title has since been revised to “Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapies.” A variation of the course was offered at the California Institute of Integral Studies as a specific approach to expressive arts. I also designed a 1 credit course, “Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy” that was offered at Notre Dame de Namur University’s graduate program in Marriage and Family Therapy/Art Therapy. Although the courses were electives at all three universities, students often gave the feedback that they thought it should be a required class. Like me, they felt it gave them the skills to navigate the experiential process along with the expressive arts in therapy, and they felt more confident on their journey to becoming psychotherapists.

In addition to teaching, I have been presenting variations of Focusing with the Arts Therapies for the past 35 years at the American Art Therapy Conference, the International Association of Expressive Arts Therapies, the United States Association for Body-Oriented Psychotherapy, as well as other conferences and continuing education venues.

Publications

In my pursuit to share the crossing of Focusing with the expressive arts and mindfulness, I began to write for professional publications. The *Focusing Folio* provided a wonderful opportunity to share what I was finding through the application of Focusing and the expressive arts with a variety of clients. The first article written in 1998 described how to integrate Focusing and art therapy with post-traumatic stress disorder (Rappaport, 1998). In that article I was also able to connect the clinical practice of Focusing and art therapy with Judith Hermans’ (1992) three-stage model of trauma recovery. It felt exciting to find the interconnection between the expressive arts and Focusing practices and theory within the larger psychology field.

Perhaps a most significant unfolding of my felt sense occurred when something inside of me asked a turning-age-50 question: “What haven’t I done that I would like to do?” As I paused and waited for the answer to arise from within, I heard the following answer: “Write a book about Focusing and expressive arts.” Wow, I had not imagined myself writing a book before this! I didn’t really think of myself as a writer, despite having written a few articles. *It felt right*, although I was not completely confident about it. I feel I have been blessed with an ability to notice this felt sense and trust it—and this trusting is what led me to create art in my room and recognize it as a healing modality, rather than see it as a purely an aesthetic expression. I felt *carried forward* to pursue expressive arts and experiment with putting Focusing with the expressive arts—with many different populations (and with myself). I decided to follow this message delivered from my body’s knowing to write a book.

In 2009, I completed the book, *Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy: Accessing the Body’s Wisdom and Creative Intelligence*. The book was intended to reach several groups: Focusers, arts therapists, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and anyone else who was interested. The publisher thought it was a lofty task to market to different groups but she supported the idea, as she saw the value in the subject. It was during the writing of the book, that a coherent theory explaining how the practices I was using in Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT) came to me—based on 30 years of trying out Focusing with the expressive arts with many different populations. I remember being surprised at how the theory emerged,

and also deeply satisfied as I wrote it down. Now FOAT had comprehensive theoretical and practice framework.

I learned that a book has a particular way of making an impact. Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy was not well known in the art therapy or expressive arts therapy communities. Focusing was barely known. I asked pioneer and leading arts therapists to endorse the book and asked one of those individuals also to write a Foreword. Introducing them to the book helped to unfold the work further.

Two pioneer art therapists included Focusing-oriented art therapy in their books. In *Introduction to Art Therapy*, pioneer art therapist Judith Rubin (2010) named Focusing-oriented art therapy as a humanistic approach to art therapy. Of course, within myself I knew that my work fit into humanistic therapy, but it was gratifying to read Rubin's professional recognition of it as a theoretical and practice orientation within the art therapy field. Two years later, Cathy Malchiodi (2012) included an excerpt from my book in her *Handbook of Art Therapy* as an example of a mind-body approach to art therapy, and in 2013, Malchiodi included a chapter, "Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy with People Who Have Chronic Illnesses" in her book, *Art Therapy and Healthcare*.

Including Focusing-oriented art therapy in these three books is a major accomplishment for bringing Focusing into a new field. Later, I was invited to submit a proposal for Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy to be included in the special edition on Focusing in the *Journal of Person-Centered Psychotherapy*. I wrote an article on FOAT with trauma, which was later translated into Czechoslovakian and published in an art therapy journal in that country.

In addition to inviting arts therapists to endorse the book, I also sent a copy of the manuscript to Focusing Coordinator and Professor, Akira Ikemi, who also agreed to review the book. After reading it, he oversaw the translation and publication of the book into Japanese. Thus began a series of trainings in Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy in Japan and later at the University of Hong Kong, Centre on Behavioural Health. The book was then translated into Korean. One of my chapters, "Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy and Experiential Collage Work: History and Development in Japan" was included in a book, *Art Therapy in Asia* followed by the publication of a second book in Japanese on Focusing and the spirit of art of expressions, coauthored by Akira, Maki Miyake, and myself.

While Focusing-oriented art therapy (FOAT) was becoming known in the profession of art therapy, I also wanted it to become more known in the expressive arts therapies (includes an integration of art, dance, music, drama, poetry, etc.). To those outside of these professions, you may think they are the same or at least similar enough. However, the art therapy professional community and expressive arts therapies profession are quite distinct.

As my work deepened in Focusing-oriented expressive arts, I also felt it had a mindfulness-based orientation. As a mindfulness practitioner, I would say that Focusing-oriented art therapy is not the same as mindfulness, but it has similarities that make them more like cousins. In particular, I feel the *Focusing Attitude* of pausing...bringing awareness to the bodily felt sense, noticing what is there with an attitude of friendly curiosity is very much like mindfulness. In the over 30 years of clinical practice, I could see that when clients

did “Clearing a Space” (taking an inventory of what’s in the way of feeling “all fine” right now, setting the issues at distance outside the body, and sensing the “all fine” place), they were able to access an inherent place of wellbeing and wholeness within themselves—that is similar to qualities and energies accessed through meditation. I have hundreds of drawings of an “All Fine Place” that show images of peace, calm, radiance and light.

Thus, I began to do more presentations and writing about how Focusing-oriented art therapy and Focusing-oriented expressive arts therapy were mindfulness-based approaches. To help Focusing and Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapy become more understood in a larger context, I had the idea of including the crossing of the two in an edited volume on *Mindfulness and the Arts Therapies* (Rappaport, 2014). I sensed my contribution would place FOAT as a mindfulness-based approach among other approaches (e.g. art therapy and mindfulness; dance-therapy and mindfulness; etc.) I am happy to share that the book has just been published. In addition to the chapter I wrote on FOAT in which I compare FOAT to Thich Nhat Hanh’s mindfulness steps for transforming difficult emotions (Hanh, 1991), a former graduate student and FOAT trainee, Emily Tara Weiner, is the first author of a chapter on FOAT with children and adolescents. Emily had the opportunity to teach a Mindfulness and FOAT workshop to teens at the Omega Institute in NY; her chapter is based on the workshop she facilitated there.

Additionally, I was asked to write a chapter on how I use art in research for a new publication, *Art as Research* (McNiff, 2013). I had used Focusing and art in my doctoral research and also used it as a method to help graduate students to find a meaningful topic and to write from an embodied knowing. The chapter, “Trusting the Felt Sense in Art-Based Research” describes and demonstrates crossing Focusing, art, and research.

I share the aforementioned examples to illustrate how writing and publication provide a vehicle for further interaction, carrying the work forward and unfolding in new ways.

Development of a Training Institute

With the publication of *Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy*, it became clear to me that a home was needed to train people in Focusing-oriented expressive arts. Just like Gene’s first book, *Focusing*, a book can only take you so far. The challenge of developing something new is that essentially you are alone as the trainer until you train others who can train others, and so on. I also wanted people to learn FOAT in its depth and not just think it is as simple as creating art, doing creative movement, or expressing a sound from a felt sense. There’s much more to it theoretically and clinically. From that knowing came the vision and steps to create the Focusing and Expressive Arts Institute in Santa Rosa, CA. The institute has worked in collaboration with The Focusing Institute in NY where trainees can become certified as Focusing Professionals or Therapists with a specialization in the expressive arts.

REFLECTIONS TO PASS ALONG

If I can share anything about how this *combinality* of Focusing and other things work, it is really to first notice the stirring of the aliveness within—a felt sense of energy and

meaning. If you listen to your felt sense with an attitude of friendly curiosity, it will unfold, revealing more about itself. The felt sense is available within our experience of everything as well as each particular thing, at any moment. When we bring Focusing to anything, there is a combinality, a synthesis, a creative unfolding. I believe when we combine Focusing with something we love, as I have been doing with the expressive arts and mindfulness, our work evolves into something deeply satisfying and even more than originally imagined. To me, this is powerful and magical!

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