

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Expressive Therapies Theses

Mental Health & Well-Being

Spring 4-27-2025

The Impact of Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) on College Students Experiencing Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

Mikki H. Lane

Lesley University, mikki.h.lane@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_therapies_theses



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lane, Mikki H., "The Impact of Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) on College Students Experiencing Stress, Anxiety, and Depression" (2025). *Expressive Therapies Theses*. 32.
https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_therapies_theses/32

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Mental Health & Well-Being at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

**The Impact of Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) on
College Students Experiencing Stress, Anxiety, and Depression**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2025

Mikki H. Lane

Expressive Arts Therapy

Dr. Raquel Stevenson

Abstract

This arts-based research explores how Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) supports college students in coping with stress, anxiety, and depression. Due to academic pressures, social transitions, and developmental milestones, college students are especially vulnerable to mental health challenges (Schaufeli et al., 2002). This arts-based approach to the research explores the impact of Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) on college students experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression. Specifically, the study looked to determine if FOAT® could lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression in college students who were experiencing these challenges. The research approach included the case study of one college student, Jane (a pseudonym). Jane was experiencing stress, anxiety, and some depression. The clinician, a level 2 Focusing Oriented Expressive Arts Therapist intern, conducted the FOAT® sessions with Jane. The results of this study suggested that FOAT® impacted Jane positively in a few areas: emotional regulation and processing, observable physical manifestations of lowered anxiety, and increased self-awareness and empowerment. The main findings in this study were that FOAT® can reduce feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression in college students.

Keywords: Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®), college students, stress, anxiety, depression, art therapy

Author Identity Statement: I am a White, 62-year-old, cis-gendered, heterosexual who identifies as a female. The New England state I live in is 90% White. The college where I interned is primarily White at about 60%. I come from a Jewish background.

The Impact of Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) on College Students Experiencing Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

Introduction

Stress, anxiety, and depression are words that are frequently used today. Most people feel some sort of tension, worry, or sadness when they express anxiety, stress, and depression. This is normal as we react to changes, challenges, and threats in our lives (World Health Organization, 2023). Overusing any of these terms reduces their clinical importance (Marone, 2024). Because of this, I wanted to find out how college students are affected by stress, anxiety, and depression, and if Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) could help. I decided to explore this work using the arts, specifically the checking-in process within FOAT®, after each session with my client, Jane, a pseudonym.

This arts-based qualitative research study explored how FOAT® could support one single college student who was coping with stress, anxiety, and depression. The procedure involved conducting FOAT® sessions where the clinician guided Jane through techniques such as body centered check-ins, identifying a handle (a word, phrase, gesture, color, etc.), engaging in creative expression through writing and imagery, and using mindfulness exercises. Through this work, identifying themes (thematic analysis) was used.

While working in my second graduate internship at a small rural college in New England, I noticed a problem in that many of my clients were experiencing much anxiety, stress, and depression. While the specific experiences of stressors, anxiety, and depression were different among the undergraduates, the students' overall emotional presentations appeared similar. When students arrived at my office, they were appreciative to be offered a cup of herbal tea. They sat in the overstuffed chair wringing their hands, shaking their feet, playing with jewelry, playing with

the fidgets in my basket of fidget toys, and/or shifting from position to position. These observations aligned clearly with common symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. Additionally, most students showed some signs of restlessness, irritability, a hard time making decisions, lack of time-management, dysregulated sleep, or poor concentration. Finally, some experienced tension in their bodies, a change in appetite, feeling sad and lonely as if nobody liked them, and all in all, feeling hopeless. These are all symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. I was curious to know if FOAT® would help relieve their levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. If so, it would make for some happier, more relaxed, and focused students.

Exploring how stress, anxiety, and depression were affecting these students was of great interest to me because I saw so much of it in my student clientele. Many of these students were still feeling the effects of isolation and loneliness from the Covid-19 pandemic, and they have been integrating themselves back into a somewhat normalized life and routine, some successfully, others not so much.

As an expressive arts therapy (EXAT) graduate student, I wanted to explore the potential of EXAT for students who were unfamiliar with this approach. This was important because over the last three years, I have learned that so many thoughts, feelings, problems, and emotions can be worked out through the expressive arts. Specifically, I recently completed level two training in Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy and wanted to put my training to good use. In essence, FOAT® includes guiding clients through mindfulness and body-based techniques that include self-reflection on specific issues and mental clearing, aimed at enhancing inner awareness before engaging in creative expression (Rappaport, 2023; 2009; 2014). Rappaport (2023; 2016) explains there are two ways to practice FOAT®. One method, ARTS-Focusing,

begins with the expressive arts so clients can keep their eyes open, where the felt sense is implicit in the art process. In this method, clients don't need to listen to their bodies if it feels unsafe for them to do so. The other method, FOCUSING-arts is a therapeutic approach that creates a safe space for clients to turn inward and connect mindfully with their felt sense. This process allows them to express their experiences through art, fostering deeper self-awareness and creativity. For this paper, I will be using FOCUSING-arts with my client. Through this process, I wanted to learn how FOAT® could be a dynamic release for students who were not eager to engage in talk therapy. Through the artistic process, students would, with any luck, learn techniques that would ultimately be useful, and they could take the skills with them to work on their issues and realize the benefits of artmaking and its connection to helping them feel better.

My goal for this study was to see if Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) could be an effective tool to help students alleviate their feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Literature Review

College students are stressed out! They face significant mental health challenges, with stress, anxiety, and depression among the most widespread concerns. A 2024 survey from the American College Health Association highlighted the high prevalence of mental health struggles among college students. Fifty percent reported anxiety, 60% experienced depression, 53% cited stress, and almost 25% had contemplated suicide (American College Health Association, 2024). These startling figures underline the critical need for effective mental health interventions.

The college-age student demographic may not always like or resonate with traditional therapeutic approaches, such as talk therapy, especially when there is a great amount of verbal communication. This can feel inaccessible or intimidating to students who struggle with

articulating their emotions as well as the stigma of talk therapy. Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) offers a creative and embodied therapeutic approach that integrates the Focusing technique—a method that helps individuals tune in to bodily sensations and uncover underlying emotion with the arts. This literature review investigates the benefits of FOAT® for college students who are dealing with mental health concerns. Its fundamental factors, therapeutic benefits, and effects on how it addresses and works with stress, anxiety, and depression, will be explored.

Stages of Development

Erik Erikson developed psychosocial life stages (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). He stated that in our development from infancy through old age, there are eight stages we ultimately go through, including the needs of an individual vs. the needs of society. Inclusively, these stages are stage one: Trust vs. Mistrust (birth—18 months), stage two: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (18 months—three years), stage three: Initiative vs. Guilt, (three—five years), stage four: Industry vs. Inferiority (five—12 years), stage five: Identity vs. Role Confusion (12—18 years), stage six: Intimacy vs. Isolation (18—40 years), stage seven: Generativity vs. Stagnation (40—65 years), and stage eight: Integrity vs. Despair (65—death) (Sutton, 2020). College students are generally just on the cusp of exiting stage five, Identity vs. Confusion and entering stage six, Intimacy vs. Isolation stages (McLeod, 2024). If stages are navigated through successfully, a person would be seen as well developed and more able to take on the challenges that life offers (McLeod, 2024; Sutton, 2020). If unsuccessful in navigation, a person can feel inadequate with a poor sense of self and may not be able to grow and complete other stages that Erikson lays out, such as the middle and older age stages of contributing to society and making meaning from the life they have lived (McLeod, 2024; Sutton, 2020).

As the pressure and inevitable changes occur when a student leaves home for college, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development come boldly into play. Students are faced with myriad changes, which include the changing body image, search for personality, integration of new friendships, workload (if working), and management of social life and homework. All of this happens while they are trying to find their own sense of identity and trying to figure out where and how they fit into the college environment (Sutton, 2020). This can be quite stressful and anxiety producing, with so many changes taking place at once. Successful transition from this stage helps to avoid an identity crisis (Sutton, 2020).

Stress, Anxiety, and Depression in College Students

Prevalence of Mental Health Challenges in College Students

Mental health problems among college students are alarmingly high (Abrams, 2022). The figures from a 2024 survey by the American College Health Association highlight that 50% reported anxiety, 60% experienced depression, 53% cited stress, and almost 25% had contemplated suicide (American College Health Association, 2024). These startling figures underscore the serious need for novel, accessible, and creative therapeutic interventions. Anxiety is a common problem among college students (Abrams, 2022). Many students face symptoms like physical tension, which can include tight muscles and a racing heartbeat (Anxiety disorders, n.d.). In addition to these symptoms, anxiety can also manifest as nervousness and feelings of panic and doom (Anxiety disorders, n.d.). Students may also struggle to focus on their studies, avoid social situations, and experience constant worrying (Abrams, 2022).

If anxiety is not treated, it can lead to ongoing stress that affects a student's daily life and also lead to depression (*What Doctors Wish Patients Knew about Managing Anxiety Disorders*, 2023; Anxiety disorders, n.d.). This can make it hard for students to enjoy time with family, keep

friendships, and succeed in school or work (Anxiety disorders, n.d.). Anxiety disorders can impact every area of a student's life, so it is important to seek help and address these challenges (Anxiety disorders, n.d.). In other words, there can be symptoms that include lack of concentration, a racing mind, making simple mistakes, feelings of irritability and restlessness, a racing heart, and trouble sleeping, to name a few (Anxiety disorders, n.d.; Mayo Clinic, 2022).

Symptoms of depression in college students can include a range of emotional and functional impairments, such as feelings of sadness, tearfulness, emptiness or hopelessness, angry outbursts, irritability, or frustration (Mayo Clinic, 2022). Beyond these emotional changes, depression can also lead to a loss of interest or pleasure in most or all normal activities, such as sex, hobbies, or sports (Depression [major depressive disorder] Symptoms and causes, n.d). Students experiencing depression may also experience sleep disturbances, which can turn into either insomnia (difficulty sleeping) or sleeping too much (Depression [major depressive disorder] Symptoms and causes, n.d). Another common symptom is feeling extremely tired with a lack of energy, making even small tasks overwhelming (Depression [major depressive disorder] Symptoms and causes, n.d). Changes in appetite and weight can also occur, with some individuals experiencing reduced appetite and weight loss, while others may have increased cravings for food and weight gain (Depression [major depressive disorder] Symptoms and causes, n.d). Understanding and addressing these pressures is essential for tending to student well-being and success.

Academic and Social Pressures

College students often experience significant academic stress, which includes heavy coursework, high-performance expectations, and time management difficulties. In addition, competition, career uncertainty, and burnout are also pressures that create an environment ripe

for mental health challenges (Adams, 2016). Additionally, some research shines a spotlight on college and university students who, compared to other groups, tend to have psychological and behavioral problems because of academic, employment, and relationship pressures (Auerbach et al., 2016).

Navigating social relationships, social media, and perfectionism—and for first year and specifically first-generation students, adjusting to a new environment, along with dealing with peer pressure—further contribute to students' stress and anxiety. Social media comparisons often exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and isolation, especially for minority and international students, who may also face challenges related to cultural adjustment, discrimination, or identity struggles of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Financial Pressures

Rising tuition costs, student loan debt, and the pressure to balance academic and financial responsibilities add another layer of stress that college students face. Students juggling part-time jobs or dealing with financial uncertainty may also experience increased anxiety about their future (Adams, 2016). The connection between depression, the total number of hours a student sleeps, and the total number of hours a student works all have a direct impact on financial stress (Pelz et al., 2021). According to Pelz et al. (2021), the impact of stress on low-income, first-generation students is high. The link between these pressures and mental health challenges (anxiety, depression, and stress) and physical health problems (sleep disturbances and fatigue) are important to note (Adams 2016; Mofatteh 2021). Low-income, first-generation students are already at risk of terminating their studies early because of financial constraints (Pelz et al., 2021). Additionally, students more often than not, take their financial situation and family's socio-economic status into consideration as they try to navigate their college experiences.

Increasingly, many students do not have a choice as to whether they will work themselves through college (Pelz et al., 2021). Furthermore, according to the Education Data Initiative, the average federal college student loan debt in 2024 was \$38,375.00 (Hanson, 2024). For any student trying to manage financial stress, this number can have a huge impact on their experience of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Mental and Physical Health Impact

According to Mofatteh (2021), six different topics were identified as risk factors in college students: psychological, academic, biological, lifestyle, social, and financial. To provide a more complete picture, we can consider each of the identified risk factors. Beginning with psychological factors, the risks here could involve pre-existing mental health conditions, difficulty adjusting to a new environment, feelings of isolation, or pressure to succeed. Academic factors include the stress of coursework, exams, competition with peers, fear of failure, or difficulty managing academic workload. Biological factors encompass changes in sleep patterns, diet, exercise, or hormonal fluctuations associated with this stage of life. Lifestyle factors relate to poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, substance use, or difficulty balancing academic and personal life. Social factors involve navigating new social dynamics, feeling pressure to fit in, experiencing loneliness, or lack of a strong support network. Finally, financial factors include concerns about tuition fees, living expenses, student loans, or the need to work while studying.

The cumulative effects of these pressures often lead to mental health challenges, including increased anxiety, depression, and stress (Mofatteh, 2021). Physical health problems, such as sleep disturbances and fatigue, are also common (Mofatteh, 2021). In some cases, students may struggle with concentration, experience feelings of being overwhelmed, and even face higher dropout rates (Adams, 2016).

Foundation of Focusing Oriented Arts Therapy (FOAT®)

The foundation of FOAT® was developed over a period of 30 years of integrating Eugene Gendlin's Focusing method with the expressive arts with a wide variety of clinical populations (Rappaport, 2013; 2015; 2023; 2009; Weiner & Rappaport, 2014). This method encourages individuals to connect with their bodily sensations (referred to as the *felt sense*) by providing a non-verbal path to access and process difficult emotional or psychological experiences. The action of Focusing helps people access all of their experiences and feelings including the difficult, challenging, and positive emotions such as happiness, love, etc. It helps them to hone into inner feelings, emotions, and circumstances. This gives them a non-verbal path for exploring emotions that might be too difficult to articulate (Gendlin, 2007). Gendlin (2007) highlighted that resolving emotional obstacles necessitates an acceptance and understanding of these physical cues. For college students coping with stress, anxiety, and depression, Focusing offers a valuable tool for sorting through delicate emotional terrains with a safe and accessible approach.

Integration of Arts in Therapy

Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) blends Gendlin's (2007) Focusing technique with art therapy. This marriage supports a deeper connection between emotional experiences and how they are presented externally through creative processes. Overall, the combination enhances the therapeutic results by integrating mind and body awareness (Rappaport, 2009; 2023; 2014; Gendlin, 2007).

Gendlin (2007), Rappaport (2009; 2023), and Cornell (2013) describe how Focusing facilitates inward, embodied awareness, while art therapy provides an outlet for processing and externalizing these emotions. For example, a student experiencing anxiety might focus on a

bodily sensation like tightness in the chest and then use a creative medium such as painting to explore and release this emotional tension. FOAT® is used in various settings, including psychiatric hospitals, schools, and prisons, and is adaptable to individual, family, and group therapy formats (Rappaport, 2023; 2009). There is a little information about FOAT®'s use in colleges and universities (Weiland, 2012). In her capstone thesis, Weiland (2012) worked with 9 college graduate students to reduce stress using Clearing a Space (CAS). Weiland suggests further studies with Psychology graduate students, students from other graduate programs, undergraduate and high school students, and looking at different age groups in general.

Expressive Arts Therapy (EXAT) is a well-established therapeutic modality that uses visual arts, music, movement, drama, writing, and other forms of creative expression to promote emotional processing, self-discovery, and healing. The arts allow individuals to externalize internal experiences in ways that words often cannot. In FOAT®, art becomes a vehicle for accessing deeper emotional layers, especially for individuals who may find it challenging to articulate their feelings through verbal language. The benefits of creative expression in mental health include flow (being so focused on an activity that they hardly notice what is going on around them) and the processing of emotions that the mind may struggle with (Levine & Levine, 2006). Studies about art therapy suggest FOAT® may provide a safe space for emotional expression, making it particularly helpful for students dealing with anxiety and depression (Rappaport, 2023; 2009; 2013).

Key Principles of FOAT®

According to Rappaport (2023; 2009), FOAT® is built upon several core principles that punctuate safety, attunement, and creativity. These principles include safety for the client, therapeutic presence, the focusing attitude, grounding, and reflection (Rappaport, 2023; 2009). It

is important to note the definitions for each of these principles. Safety for the client makes sure the client is comfortable, and the therapist is putting the client first over anything else. Rapport between client and therapist is of the utmost importance, and the client must feel comfortable with the therapist. Therapeutic presence happens when therapists attune with their clients at the same time they are working with their own emotional responses. Therapists should remain self-aware and be continually present with their clients throughout the session. Additionally, therapists should have training in FOAT®. The Focusing attitude, a foundational principle, is about being *friendly* to the thoughts, images, and words that come to the client. The Focusing attitude is important for providing an inner safety for helping the client to explore their inner world and creative expression. Because of this, the therapist must provide a welcoming and accepting viewpoint to the client. When a therapist shows this clinical sensitivity, they tailor interventions to meet the specific needs of their population, such as using grounding exercises for trauma survivors. Grounding consists of helping clients connect to their bodies through awareness of breath and physical sensations and noticing what is going on in the environment that surrounds them. This includes focusing on the chair that supports them, the breaths they are taking, and the position of their body in the given moment, to name a few. All of this fosters safety and presence in the therapeutic space. Finally, therapists show empathic understanding by reflecting the client's experience back to them through verbal listening reflections of the essence of what the client has shared, and/or artistic reflections by sharing a simple shape, color, gesture, movement or sound that responds to the client (Rappaport, 2023; 2009).

Expressive Arts Therapy (EXAT)

The idea of Expressive Arts Therapy (EXAT) was to embrace movement from one art modality to another, as opposed to a specialized art therapy program (Levine & Levine, 1999;

Knill, et al., 2004; McNiff, 2015). Known as a modality transfer, this movement from one artform to another is called an intermodal transfer (Knill, et al., 2004). It involves, for instance, creating a painting and transferring intermodally to writing a poem about the painting. EXAT is rooted in how humans respond to art through their distress (Levine & Levine, 1999).

The benefits of creative expression in mental health have proven to be extremely powerful. Not only can students experience flow when they are engaging in EXAT, but they can also experience memories and thoughts that are inspired by artmaking. The body can help to work out much that the mind cannot. EXAT helps college students to use their bodies to engage creatively in activities such as visual art, music, movement, poetry, and drama. EXAT helps them to process emotions that their minds might otherwise have a hard time comprehending (Levine & Levine, 1999).

FOAT® as a Synthesis

FOAT® helps a person to connect to their inner self by using a checking-in process to see what might be going on inside, whether physically, emotionally, spiritually, or intellectually (Rappaport, 2023; 2009). As they are guided through this process, students check-in with themselves in the areas of mind, spirit, body, and/or inner wisdom. This check-in process is a mindfulness based Focusing exercise in which the clinician leads the client through an intervention to help the client focus on a specific issue (Rappaport, 2023; 2009). Students will develop a strong sense and acceptance of self and others, access creativity (not necessarily in the outcome but through the process), and begin to find their authentic selves (Weiland, 2012). When this happens, students' overall feelings of stress and anxiety are reduced, and their decision-making improves. Potential outcomes of this process (stronger sense of self, accessing creativity, finding their authentic selves, reduced stress and anxiety, and improved decision

making) should be highlighted. In short, students have a better understanding of their needs by going deep into themselves and listening to what truly matters to them (Rappaport, 2023; 2009).

Rappaport (2023; 2009) suggests that FOAT® fosters emotional regulation and self-awareness through four strategies. The first, mind-body integration, helps students identify and address physical tension that represents emotional stress. FOAT® inspires a holistic therapeutic experience, so engaging in expressive arts offers clients a creative outlet for freeing these emotional burdens. This, in turn, encourages integration across and between the mind and body.

The second strategy, acceptance and compassion, is helpful for students who struggle with feelings of inadequacy or self-reproach. FOAT® promotes a sense of affirmation, loving-kindness, and compassion toward oneself and others (Rappaport, 2023; 2009).

The third strategy in line is creativity and authenticity. This approach supports students to engage in creative expression, helping them to access their authentic selves and encourages self-exploration and self-expression that may otherwise be muted in more traditional therapy models (Rappaport, 2023; 2009).

The last strategy, stress reduction and spiritual growth, promotes decision-making and encourages spiritual growth and confidence (Rappaport, 2023; 2009).

FOAT®'s Therapeutic Mechanisms

Emotional Expression and Regulation

A key benefit of FOAT® is its ability to help individuals process and release unresolved issues, which are often at the root of stress and anxiety. (Rappaport 2009). In a study by Zhang et al. (2024), art therapy was found to reduce anxiety and enhance emotional regulation in individuals dealing with traumatic stress and complex emotions. Similarly, FOAT®'s combination of Focusing and artistic expression has been shown to facilitate stress release by

helping students express their anxiety-related emotions through art. Weiland (2012) shares that this provides relief from internal turmoil.

Grounding and Mindfulness and Body-centering Therapies

Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT®) dovetails mindfulness and grounding techniques through creative processes, enabling individuals to redirect their attention from anxious thoughts to the present moment (Rappaport, 2023; 2009). This embodied engagement encourages relaxation and improved attentiveness. Grounding exercises such as meditation and breathing exercises easily incorporated into art therapy sessions, aid in bringing focus back to the present, which helps to diminish anxiety and distraction (Kids First Services, 2024).

Furthermore, engaging in creative activities can serve as a relaxing mechanism that helps alleviate anxiety (Elite Mindful Health, 2023). The effectiveness of mindfulness and body-centered therapies, along with the necessity for creative, non-verbal therapeutic methods in addressing stress, anxiety, and depression, has been well-established across various populations (Rappaport, 2023; 2009; 2014). Given that many students report experiencing multiple co-occurring mental health concerns, the need for holistic approaches like FOAT® is further underscored (American College Health Association, 2024). This highlights the importance of investigating alternative therapies that actively involve students beyond conventional verbal-based methods, suggesting that approaches such as FOAT®, which combines creative expression with somatic awareness, may present significant alternative therapeutic options.

Reduction in Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

Art therapy and FOAT® specifically have been shown to reduce physical symptoms associated with anxiety, such as muscle tension, elevated heart rate, and shallow breathing. (Kaimal et al., 2016; Rappaport, 2023; 2012; 2009). According to research by Haeyen (2024),

engaging in artmaking activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which can counteract the fight-or-flight response that accompanies anxiety. As such, FOAT® offers students a non-invasive, natural means of managing anxiety, including breath awareness and a focus on the body. An example of this would be to have a student close their eyes and take a few gentle deep breaths while settling and relaxing into their body and the environment. In this situation, students are more relaxed and able to check inside to see if they have any somatic feelings or symptoms such as tightness in their upper back/shoulders or across their chest, or a butterfly feeling in the pit of their stomach, etc. This helps them to reduce their physical symptoms of anxiety (including muscle tension and a high heart rate) without relying completely on medication or talk therapy. In her capstone thesis, Weiland (2012) found that using Clearing a Space (CAS) with art was an effective way to reduce stress among the nine graduate students in her study. The connection between mind and body with FOAT® enables individuals to process and regulate their emotional experiences more effectively by activating the parasympathetic nervous system, which promotes relaxation (Haeyen, 2024).

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) on college students experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression. My thesis aimed to investigate how FOAT® would impact these students. I hypothesized that FOAT® would be helpful for students coping with levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.

My second clinical internship was at a rural, competitive, New England college. As I began this internship, I noticed the amount of stress, anxiety, and depression affecting many of my undergraduate student clients. Additionally, I had just completed my level two training in FOAT®, and it crossed my mind that FOAT® may be an effective intervention for these

students to help them reduce their stress, anxiety, and depression. It seemed a perfect combination to use my internship setting and my new FOAT® training for my thesis to see how college students were affected by using FOAT® to help reduce their stress, anxiety, and depression. In this study, I utilized a qualitative design that included the implementation of FOAT® and data analysis through thematic analysis, focusing on identifying key themes.

Jane's Experience

As I met bi-weekly with many students, I began to take note of those who were open to working with creative processes, to help them work with feelings of stress, anxiety and depression. Jane, (a pseudonym), met those criteria. Jane presented as a 19-year-old, asexual female who was creative and struggling with anxiety, stress, and depression. For this study, I used qualitative methods. I explored how FOAT® (Specifically FOCUSING-arts) was able to help Jane regulate strong emotions related to stress, anxiety, and depression and help her keep in touch with the awareness of her body by externalizing and processing difficult memories and experiences. I attuned to my client in each session to see if FOAT® would support her issues as we continued to meet bi-weekly.

Results

Jane and I met in a campus building designated for college counseling. My office was on the top floor of a two-story building, all the way at the end of a long hallway. In our initial intake session, I introduced myself to Jane and explained that I was an expressive arts therapy intern. I gestured to the room around us so that she could see all the art supplies that I offered for my clients to use. Within that introduction, I showed Jane my community doodle board and invited her to doodle while we talked if she felt so inclined. Jane was happy to be the first to enjoy doodling on the 3x5 foot canvas with the bag of colorful Sharpies supplied.

Jane came to me in a state of much anxiety and stress. She was also experiencing panic attacks surrounding her academic work, including papers, projects, and, in her words, “especially lack of time management.” Jane stated that she had not been able to process all that was going on. She said that she was feeling stress, anxiety, and some depression. During our earliest session, I asked Jane if she would be interested in learning about Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy. Jane had a creative background and was comfortable with this process once I explained FOAT® to her with a general overview. I acknowledged the art supplies in my office that were there for her to use freely. Additionally, I relayed to Jane that she may want to move her body or write in the form of a letter, write in her journal, or write poetry. I let her know that anything creative was possible and that this was a safe space for her. Because we were near the end of that session, Jane happily agreed to her first FOAT® session at her next visit.

When Jane returned two weeks later for the next session, (please note that students are seen bi-weekly at this small, New England rural college so they can accommodate more students) I noticed a little more energy in her, and she mentioned she was excited to try FOAT®. With that introduction, we began. I felt very comfortable with Jane, attuned easily, and was eager to try FOAT® with her. In my office, there are three lamps that keep the atmosphere relaxed with gentle light. I also have what the students call a comfy chair. The chair students sit in is oversized with much cushion and a decorative pillow should they choose to use it in any way. I offered Jane a cup of tea, as she made her way to the chair, and I asked her to get comfortable. Jane obliged and took off her shoes and nestled into the chair. In this FOAT® session, I told Jane that she could close her eyes, keep them open, or gently cast them down at the floor between us so that she could focus on the session. In a FOAT® session, the therapist guides the artistic process by helping the client connect to their felt sense. This ensures that the client’s creative

expression will support the therapeutic process (Rappaport, 2023; 2009). I did a check-in with Jane. I asked her to take a few deep slow breaths and to notice the air entering and exiting her body. Next, I asked her to notice her body and to also check and see how she was feeling on the inside. I reminded Jane that there was no right or wrong and to just notice any energy, feelings, or thoughts and be friendly to whatever was there. As Jane settled into this process, I noticed that although she looked relaxed and seemed calm while breathing deeply, her right leg was crossed over her left leg, and her foot was anxiously shaking. Instinctively, I was hoping that Jane would be able to relax and wanted her leg to stop shaking. Nevertheless, I continued the process, and I asked Jane to see if a word, phrase, image, shape, colour, or gesture (also known as a “handle”) came to her mind and asked her to give me a gentle nod of her head if something came to her. She nodded her head after about 5 minutes, so I asked her to be curious and friendly to whatever was there. When she instinctively nodded her head again, I asked her to check it to make sure the handle felt right. If it did, great; if not, I directed Jane to let it go and see what else came to her. When she nodded again about a minute later, I asked her if she wanted to express what she found by communicating it through the arts. Jane chose to create a watercolor and then write a letter to her ex-partner.

Jane’s watercolor reflected her FOAT® check-in. It can be seen in Figure 1. Jane explained the watercolor to me as a comforting cup of tea which helped her feel relaxed. I noticed the gentle soft colors and designs she created. Next, I suggested an intermodal transfer to Jane to move from painting to writing. Jane agreed and wrote for about 10 minutes; I noticed that she was completely engaged in the letter-writing process and that her foot, which had been wiggling almost the entire session, had stopped. I felt relief at this time because Jane was so focused, and it was so lovely to see her so immersed in the moment. Jane was in flow. She was

deeply engaged in the writing process and getting some thoughts and feelings out of her body that had been bothering her for a few weeks' time. When Jane was done, she looked up at me. I asked her how the FOAT® process was for her. With a smile, Jane hesitantly expressed feeling better after writing the letter. She decided not to give the letter to her ex, whom she was still friendly with, and did not feel comfortable sharing it with me at that time. I felt a little disappointed that Jane was not yet comfortable sharing this information with me; however, I completely understood and supported her process. We made an appointment for another session in two weeks' time. In my processing of the session, I took a few deep breaths and settled into a Focusing mode to process the session with Jane. The handle that came to me was a young person trapped in a moment in time with letters surrounding her, unable to get out of letter chaos. This image is illustrated in Figure 2.

In the next session, Jane returned and mentioned that the painting and letter writing from the previous session helped her to process and get a different viewpoint on the situation with her ex. She was able to see the situation from a couple of different perspectives, which helped her see her ex's point of view more clearly and helped her understand herself a little more deeply. She felt more at ease with me and confided that she was asexual, also known as aces, and her ex wanted more than what Jane could offer him sexually. Jane is comfortable with her sexual orientation, and the letter also punctuated that for her. Jane explained to me that her letter explored her relationship with her ex and the process of why they broke up. Jane reported that her stress and anxiety levels about the breakup were much lower, and she was feeling better about the whole situation now. I was genuinely happy for Jane and grateful that she opened up.

Jane suggested more FOAT® for the next session, and I happily obliged. This time,

through Focusing, I asked Jane to close her eyes and relax into breathing once again and to let her mind wander to a place that felt peaceful to her, a place where she felt safe and at ease. There was much going on in Jane's head that day, and she told me it was hard for her to Focus. Instead of thinking about a peaceful place, I pivoted to help her clear a space (CAS) so that she might be able to focus better in finding that peaceful place. In CAS, I directed Jane to relax her mind, and when something got in the way, I asked her to imagine wrapping up the thought/image and placing it away from her body, wherever the distance felt comfortable. Jane could decide how close or far the item was kept. This exercise was mainly to help Jane clear persistent thoughts and feelings from her mind so she could focus on the main issue. She was basically parking these other thoughts somewhere else for a few minutes. I continued to have Jane wrap up items until no more came, and she felt more relaxed. At that point, Jane was able to imagine herself in a place of ease, where everything was peaceful and all fine. As Jane settled into this place in her mind, I asked her to go deeper into the image and see if she was able to see any colors or notice anything around her, large or small. I slowly—so as not to bombard her in her calm state—asked her to look deeply to see what was around her. Were there animals? People? Foliage? Buildings? Houses? Water of any sort? What was the weather / temperature like? Was there a sky? Was it sunny? Cloudy? I noticed that at this point, Jane had tears rolling down her cheeks. As she gently wiped them away and got a sense of her surroundings, she let me know with a nod of her head that she was ready, and I brought her gently back to the present. I suggested she take a few calm breaths, gently flutter her eyes open, and gently move her hands, feet, and neck, if needed, to reacclimate to the current moment. As Jane re-entered the present moment, she cried a little more, and I held space for her. When she was able to speak, Jane reported that she was in a clearing with much foliage around the edges. The sky was sunny, and the grass was a beautiful

vivid green. Jane mentioned billowy clouds in the sky and a slight breeze in the air. Jane's image can be seen in Figure 3. Jane then mentioned that she saw her recently deceased grandmother and was able to connect with her by just being in the space together. Few words were exchanged between them, and Jane shared that she felt an enormous emotional release —also known as a felt shift. Please note a felt shift can be large as stated for Jane, or as small as a shift in breath (Gendlin 2007; (Rappaport, 2023)). She mentioned that it was so nice to see her grandmother again and be with her in those few moments. Jane mentioned that she was going to write a letter to her grandmother to tell her how much she missed her and that she and her family were processing her loss day by day. Before she left the office, Jane mentioned how good it felt to see and be with her grandmother and that the processing was becoming easier with therapy like this. When Jane left my office, I was touched by her ability to gently relax into FOAT® and go as deeply into it as she did. I took a few minutes after she left to create my response to this session. In my response, I included the clearing Jane described, and Jane's grandmother can be seen in the back left of the image inside of a big tear. My response can be seen in Figure 4.

In the third session with Jane, she began talking in therapy as if we were two old friends, suggesting a deepening of our therapeutic relationship. This delighted me! During this session, Jane told me she wanted to tell me her original reason for seeking therapy. My stomach lurched, and I became hyper-aware of her and the room we were in. In that moment, I wanted to be sure that I was giving her my undivided attention, perhaps even more so than usual. Somehow, I was prepared for the worst. Jane stated to me that she had a lot of “family baggage,” and one specific incident was weighing heavily on her mind. Jane proceeded to tell me about a situation that she experienced when she was young, about eight or nine years of age.

Jane recounted a childhood memory of a tumultuous situation involving her parents'

separation. One day, while her grandmother, father, and his girlfriend were in the backyard, her mother saw them together and reacted by yelling at them, frightening Jane and she tried to stop her mother from yelling to no avail. In response, Jane ran into the house and hid in a closet to feel safe. Years later, at a family reunion, her grandmother unexpectedly praised Jane's bravery during that incident, which shocked her and brought back painful memories. Feeling overwhelmed, Jane left the situation to find comfort. Later, she talked to her father about the event, which helped her feel better. However, she was surprised by the differing perspectives: she felt shattered, while her grandmother thought she had been brave. I suggested for Jane to Focus on the issue to see if something would come up for her. In this situation, Jane chose to create a watercolor image again which can be seen in Figure 5. Jane preferred to do more talking about the circumstances she experienced, mainly because, as she stated, "I am not ready to go there today." However, she did tell me that she would write a letter to her grandmother. My FOAT® response to the session can be seen in Figure 6.

Additionally, I kept a black Sharpie image log which I added to after each day of counseling. The images for Jane's sessions can be seen in Figures 7-14. This process helped me to better manage the day's sessions and leave my clients' issues at the office instead of bringing them home with me.

When Jane arrived for her sessions, I would check-in with her to see how she was doing and ask if there was anything of importance that she wanted to explore on that particular day. When there were specific situations she wanted to explore, I did a FOAT® check-in with her. This procedure worked most sessions, and occasionally Jane just wanted to talk. At other times, we explored other areas of FOAT® such as The Protector, Working in an Issue, Clearing a Space, Inner Advisor, Transforming the Inner Critic, and others (Rappaport, 2023; 2009). Most

of these FOAT® interventions begin with a settling in (to the large, oversized chair where she sat), taking a few deep breaths, and letting Jane be guided by me for the rest of the FOAT® practice with a simple guided meditation. Jane would often come up with a handle (image, phrase, word, gesture, movement) that came to her in the check-in timeframe. As I brought Jane back slowly into the space from her meditation, I asked her “How was that for you?” and “Was there anything that you learned or would like to explore further?” Many times, I asked her what her images would say to her if they could speak – or what the images were trying to tell her. Jane always had a thoughtful response which usually ended up in a phrase of gratitude and enlightenment about what the session revealed to her. I collected three images that Jane created. With Jane’s signed permission, they are included as Figures 1, 3, and 5.

Discussion

The main finding in this study was that FOAT® can help ease feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression in a college student. Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy has had a positive impact on my client, Jane. By using qualitative methods and thematic analysis, I explored how FOAT® was able to help Jane regulate strong emotions related to stress, anxiety, and depression and keep in touch with the awareness of her body by externalizing and processing difficult memories and experiences. FOAT® has many benefits for people experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression. I used qualitative methods and thematic analysis in this study and observed that the findings suggest FOAT® had a positive impact on Jane through emotional regulation and processing, observable physical manifestations of decreased anxiety, and increased self-awareness and empowerment.

Emotional Regulation and Processing

FOAT® had a positive impact on my client, Jane, because she was able to keep in touch

with the awareness of her body by externalizing and processing difficult memories and experiences. The FOAT® process appeared to provide Jane with a significant emotional outlet, leading to her feeling better after each session. This aligned with the idea that FOAT® can help individuals externalize and symbolically represent their emotions through various creative formats, which potentially leads to emotional release and insight when verbal expression is difficult (Rappaport, 2023; 2009).

FOAT® seemed to facilitate Jane's ability to manage strong anxiety-related emotions, which in turn lessened her anxiety and stress associated with negative self-talk and thinking. Take for instance the session when she was trying to get her mother to stop yelling at her father. This situation was extremely difficult for Jane to find words to talk about and process. It became much easier for Jane to process when I suggested using FOAT® to help her manage her strong feelings. This was an efficient way for Jane to provide a non-verbal outlet and supports the concept that FOAT® encourages mindfulness, self-awareness, and self-regulation, which can contribute to reduced anxiety (Kaimal et al., 2016; Rappaport, 2023; 2009) and greater emotional regulation (Gendlin, 2007).

Additionally, Jane's letter writing to her ex-partner and deceased grandmother, along with her experience in finding a peaceful place to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety, served as tangible reminders of her therapeutic insights and progress Jane has made over time.

Through emotional regulation and processing, Jane was able to reduce negative self-talk and gained a feeling of accomplishment. The creative process helped Jane to reconnect with her emotions and rediscover a sense of support and hope (McNiff, 2015). FOAT® utilizes a key mechanism that enables deeper emotional awareness and healing by accessing bodily sensations, thus sidestepping only cognitive processing. This core principle is illustrated by Jane's

experience, where focusing on her bodily sensations, specifically the anxiety manifested as leg shaking, directly portrays this emotional regulation. While Jane was engaged in Focusing, her leg shaking ceased entirely. This outcome directly aligns with the foundational principles of FOAT®, as highlighted in the Literature Review, particularly Gendlin's (2007) concept of the felt sense and Rappaport's (2023; 2009) emphasis on mind-body integration, including the felt shift. Furthermore, the literature on grounding and mindfulness within FOAT® underscores their relevant role in shifting focus away from anxious thoughts (felt shift) and towards inner bodily sensations (Rappaport, 2023; 2009).

Observable Physical Manifestations of Decreased Anxiety

A notable observation was the reduction in Jane's fidgeting and foot-wiggling as the FOAT® sessions progressed. This physical change was interpreted as a potential sign that FOAT® activated her parasympathetic nervous system, leading to a reduction in muscle tension (Anxiety disorders, n.d.). This felt shift aligns with research suggesting that engaging in artmaking can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, counteracting the fight-or-flight response associated with anxiety (Haeyen, 2024). According to Rappaport (2008), FOAT® utilizes bodily sensations to facilitate emotional understanding and recovery, moving beyond purely intellectual engagement.

This principle of how physical symptoms reflect reduced anxiety is shown in Jane's experience. By focusing on her inner bodily sensations, she was able to regulate her emotions, and her leg shaking stopped completely. This outcome supports the main ideas of FOAT®, as described in the Literature Review, especially Gendlin's (2007) idea of the felt sense and Rappaport's (2023; 2009) focus on the connection between the mind and body which includes the felt shift. By attending to physical manifestations of feelings such as anxiety, Jane was able

to achieve emotional regulation. This approach aligns with key FOAT® principles, including the "felt sense" and a felt shift which include the integration of mind and body. Techniques like grounding and mindfulness within FOAT® also help move attention from anxious thoughts to these somatic experiences. Jane's experience of her leg shaking ceasing through Focusing exemplifies this core mechanism of a felt shift of FOAT® in action (Rappaport, 2023; 2008).

Increased Self-awareness and Empowerment

Jane was also able to articulate the issues with her grandmother's death and the moment in the garden when her mother was screaming at her father only after settling into some time spent creating images that helped her explore these issues. The externalization of Jane's feelings in this instance led to emotional releases and insights through the creative process when Jane was unable to find the words to express herself. The creative process (Jane's artwork) functioned as a shared reference point and nurtured improved communication and understanding in therapy sessions. This process allowed for deeper emotional awareness and healing for Jane by accessing the sensations in her body and circumventing purely cognitive processing. Through the FOAT® process, Jane's letter writing, finding a peaceful place, and work about her grandmother functioned as a tangible reminder of calming insights and progress being made. In a FOAT® session, the therapist guides the artistic process by helping the client connect to their felt sense. This ensures that the client's creative expression will support the therapeutic process (Rappaport, 2023; 2009). Additionally, Rappaport (2023; 2009; 2013; 2015), Vernon (2022), and Weiner, E. T. & Rappaport, L. (2014) state that mindfulness, Focusing, and art therapy revealed a positive association that supported increased measures of well-being and self-efficacy in various populations. This was true for Jane. Over a few weeks' time, I noticed increased confidence, self-compassion, and resilience (Vernon, 2022; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Knill et al. (2005)

stated the importance of decentering, a process involving stepping outside of habitual ways of thinking and perceiving which facilitates alternative experiences. This can help a person process intense emotions in a safe way and not feel overwhelmed by the method. For Jane, FOAT® encouraged mindfulness, self-awareness, and self-regulation and helped to reduce her anxiety, reduce muscle tension, and physical arousal when activated (Kaimal et al., 2016). Jane was able to stay present with her emotions, which, in turn, led to a sense of greater emotional regulation and the reduction of symptoms of anxiety (Gendlin, 2007; Rappaport, 2023; 2009). FOAT® helped Jane improve her self-esteem, emotional flexibility, and general empowerment (Rappaport, 2023; 2009). In general, through her creative process, Jane reduced negative self-talk and gained a feeling of accomplishment. The creative process helped Jane to reconnect with her emotions and rediscover a sense of agency and hope (McNiff, 2015).

Jane is a person of few words, and I am grateful for the artistic process that helped her release the many emotions she was holding inside for so long and creating the ability for her to open up to me over time. I am not sure talk therapy would have been supportive for Jane, but I will never know.

Reflection

Throughout this process, I learned what I thought I would: FOAT® is a powerful tool in helping to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression in a college student. Jane was a great candidate to help me through this process. I enjoyed watching Jane's felt sense unfold and witness slow and sometimes subtle felt shift changes she made throughout our time together.

Limitations

These findings may not represent diverse experiences of college students who face similar stressors. Jane was not impacted by the social and financial strains of a typical college

student, and further research would need to be undertaken in that area. This clearly acknowledges the limitation of a single case study. Because there was only one person in this study, I realize that there may be inherent bias in working with one person and that there may be generalizations used that are unintended. I believe my bias may have been influenced by my expectations of the FOAT® process. I have seen time and again with myself and others the positive outcomes of FOAT® and was hopeful that the same would happen with Jane. Data analysis results should be different if the FOAT® process is used in future college and university setting studies because it is assumed there will be more than one participant. It is recommended to include a larger sample of students in future studies, as well as quantitative measures to be taken before, throughout, and at the end of the study.

Implications

There is growing evidence that art therapy and Focusing techniques can benefit mental health. However, more thorough studies are needed to understand how Focusing-oriented expressive arts therapy affects college students. Research methods like randomized controlled trials and long-term studies could help us learn more about how FOAT® impacts issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress in college populations.

Dovetailing FOAT® into College Campus Life

FOAT® can be incorporated into existing mental health services on college campuses and used as a structured intervention by providing individual or group therapy, creating a space that is inclusive for all students, focusing on creative expression, and helping students focus on the process, not the outcome. Incorporating FOAT® into college campuses will create self-confidence, help with stress and anxiety reduction, and finally, help students feel more connected to themselves and others.

Some potential challenges to incorporating FOAT® into college campuses might be items such as required resources, staff/counselor training, funding, and strategies for making FOAT® accessible and appealing to a diverse student body.

Gaps in Literature and Long-Term Studies

Future studies with larger more diverse samples at colleges and universities could build upon these initial findings. Future research should include students from various backgrounds, income levels, and those who face a broader range of challenges. Adding long-term studies to a future study would have significant impact in assessing the sustained effectiveness of FOAT® for college students' mental health.

Quantitative data would be a strong addition to this study. Levels of stress, anxiety, and depression could be measured at the onset, in the middle, and again at the conclusion of the study. This would strengthen the evidence base and allow for a more objective assessment of FOAT®'s effectiveness.

Cross-Cultural Applicability

As far as cross-cultural applicability is concerned, there is much to be shared on Google Scholar about how FOAT® can be adapted to diverse cultural contexts; however, there are few studies and little information about how and whether its effectiveness varies across different populations. This would be another substantial research area for FOAT®'s effects culturally worldwide. Adapting FOAT® to cultures around the world would further add to a crucial area of research.

Conclusion

Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy has had a positive impact on my client, Jane. To answer my research question, the main findings in this study were that FOAT® can reduce

feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression in college students. I witnessed the reduction of all three with Jane. The main evidence from Jane's case that supports this conclusion includes the observed reduction in anxiety symptoms and her reported emotional felt shift releases.

While one previous study has specifically tested FOAT®'s effectiveness in college graduate student populations (Weiland, 2012), the combination of Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy and the reduction of stress, anxiety, and depression provide a promising innovative approach to addressing the unique mental health challenges faced by this demographic. By combining the embodied awareness of Focusing with expressive arts therapy, FOAT® is a powerful tool for emotional regulation, stress reduction, and self-discovery. Long-term research on how college students are affected by and respond to FOAT® could explore specific areas, such as the long-term effectiveness and cross-cultural adaptability of FOAT®, as well as ways to incorporate FOAT® into existing campus mental health programs. This would ultimately enhance the availability and effectiveness of FOAT® for this population. The process of creative expression in FOAT® has the potential to increase students' self-esteem and self-confidence. By producing something tangible and meaningful, students can experience a sense of accomplishment, which may counteract the negative self-talk and feelings of inadequacy often experienced in stress, anxiety, and depression. This can be particularly important for college students who are navigating academic and social challenges that often exacerbate depressive symptoms (Gergen et al., 2018).

Figure 1

Jane finds a Peaceful Place (Jane's artwork)



Figure 2

Jane's Letter Conundrum (own work)



Figure 3

Jane Thinks About Her Grandmother (Jane's artwork)



Figure 4

Jane's Grandmother Comes for a Visit (own work)

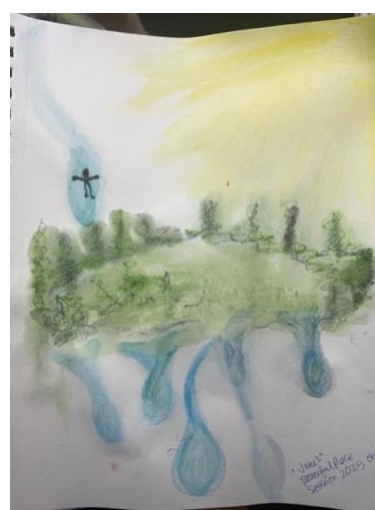


Figure 5

Jane Remembers (Jane's artwork)



Figure 6

Jane Is Scared (own work)

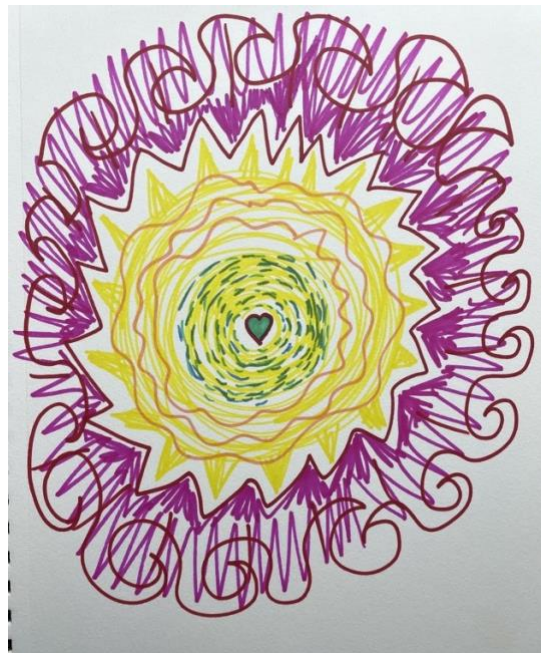


Figure 7

Journal entry 1 (own work)



Figure 8

Journal entry 2 (own work)

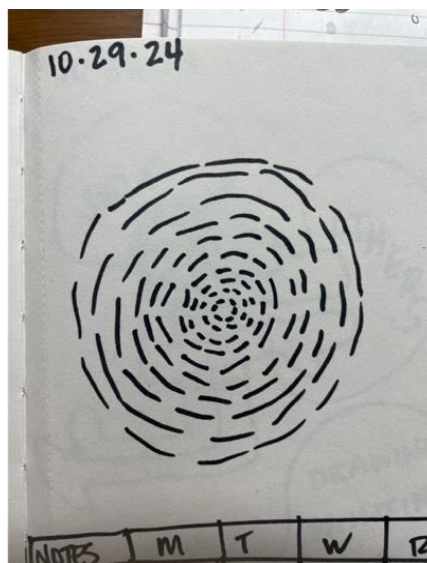


Figure 9

Journal entry 3 (own work)

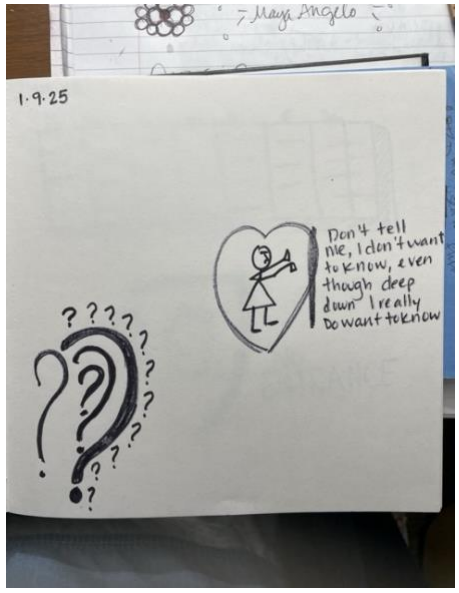


Figure 10

Journal entry 4 (own work)



Figure 11

Journal entry 5 (own work)

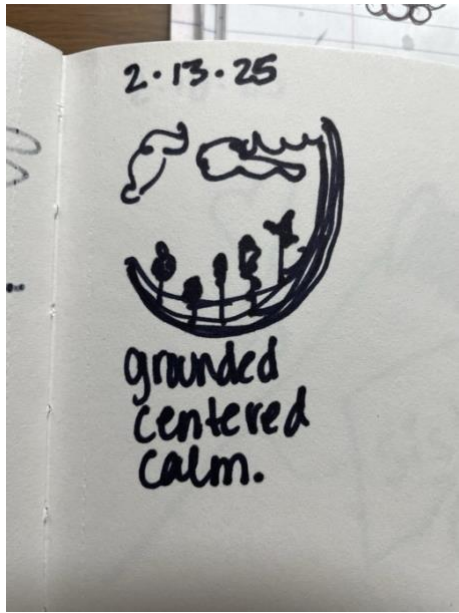


Figure 12

Journal entry 6 (own work)

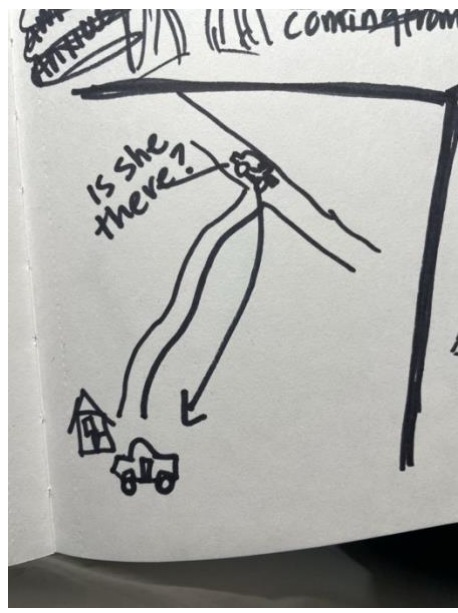


Figure 13

Journal entry 7 (own work)



Figure 14

Journal entry 8 (own work)



Figure 15

Final FOAT® response to Jane (own work)



References

- Adams, D. R., Meyers, S. A., & Beidas, R. S. (2016). The relationship between financial strain, perceived stress, psychological symptoms, and academic and social integration in undergraduate students. *Journal of American College Health: 64(5)*, 362–370.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2016.1154559>
- American College Health Association. (2024). *Undergraduate student reference group*.
https://www.acha.org/wp-content/uploads/NCHA-IIIb_Spring_2024_Undergraduate_reference_group_executive_summary.pdf
- Anxiety disorders. (n.d.). <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/anxiety-disorders>
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55(5)*, 469-480.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>
- Auerbach, R. P., Alonso, J., Axinn, W. G., Cuijpers, P., Ebert, D. D., Green, J. G., Hwang, I., Kessler, R. C., Liu, H., Mortier, P., Nock, M. K., Pinder-Amaker, S., Sampson, N. A., Aguilar-Gaxiola, S., Al-Hamzawi, A., Andrade, L. H., Benjet, C., Caldas-de-Almeida, J. M., Demyttenaere, K., ...Bruffaerts, R. (2016). Mental disorders among college students in the World Health Organization World Mental Health Surveys. *Psychological Medicine, 46(14)*, 2955–2970. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291716001665>
- Cornell, A. W. (2013). *Focusing in clinical practice: The essence of change*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Depression (major depressive disorder)—Symptoms and causes. (n.d.). Mayo Clinic.
<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20356007>

- Elite Mindful Health. (2023, August 30). *The art of relaxation: Creative outlets for easing anxiety* | elite mindful health. Elite Mindful Health.
<https://elitemindfulhealth.com/anxiety-treatment/the-art-of-relaxation-creative-outlets-for-easing-anxiety/>
- Gendlin, E. (2007). *Focusing* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Gergen, K., McNamee, S., & Barrett, F. (2018). Relationality and mental health: The role of creativity in psychological healing. *Journal of Community Psychology, 46* (1), 97-108.
- Hanson, M. (2024, July 15). *Student loan debt statistics*. Education Data Initiative; EducationData.org.<https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-statistics>
- Haeyen S. (2024). A theoretical exploration of polyvagal theory in creative arts and psychomotor therapies for emotion regulation in stress and trauma. *Frontiers in Psychology, 15*, 1382007.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1382007>
- Kaimal, G., Ray, K., & Muniz, J. (2016). Reduction of cortisol levels and participants' responses following art making. *Art Therapy, 33*(2), 74–80.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2016.1166832>
- Kids First Services. (2024). *Art therapy and mindfulness: Creating calm through creativity* Kidsfirstservices.com. <https://www.kidsfirstservices.com/first-insights/art-therapy-and-mindfulness-creating-calm-through-creativity>
- Klagsbrun, J., Rappaport, L., Speiser, V. M., Post, P., Byers, J., Stepakoff, S., & Karman, S. (2005). Focusing and expressive arts therapy as a complementary treatment for women with breast cancer. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 1*(1), 107–137.

- Paolo Knill, Helen Nienhaus Barba, & Fuchs, M. N. (2004). *Minstrels of soul: Intermodal expressive therapy*. EGS Press.
- Knill, P. J., Levin, E.G., & Levine, S.K., (2005). *Principles and practice of expressive arts therapy toward a therapeutic aesthetics*. J. Kingsley Publishers.
- Levine, S. K., & Levine, E. G. (Eds.). (1999). *Foundations of expressive arts therapy: Theoretical and clinical perspectives*. J. Kingsley Publishers.
- Marone, L. (2024). Are we overusing the term “anxiety”? *Psychology Today*.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/gaining-and-sustaining/202407/are-we-overusing-the-term-anxiety>
- Mayo Clinic. (2022, October 14). *Depression (major depressive disorder)*. Mayo Clinic; Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/symptoms-causes/syc-20356007>
- McLeod, S. (2024). Erik Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development. *Simply Psychology*.
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>
- McNiff, S. (2015). *Art as medicine: Creating a therapy of the imagination*. Shambhala.
- Mofatteh, M. (2021). Risk factors associated with stress, anxiety, and depression among university undergraduate students. *AIMS Public Health*, 8(1), 36–65.
<https://doi.org/10.3934/publichealth.2021004>
- Orenstein, G., & Lewis, L. (2022). *Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development*. National Library of Medicine; StatPearls Publishing.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK556096/>

- Peltz, J. S., Bodenlos, J. S., Kingery, J. N., & Rogge, R. D. (2021). The role of financial strain in college students' work hours, sleep, and mental health. *Journal of American College Health, 69*(6), 577–584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1705306>
- Rappaport, L. (2008). Focusing-oriented art therapy. *The Folio: Journal for Focusing and Experiential Therapy, 21*(1), 139–155. https://focusing.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/12_FocusingOrientTRIB.pdf
- Rappaport, L. (2009). *Focusing-oriented art therapy: Accessing the body's wisdom and creative intelligence*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Rappaport, L. (2013). Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy with People Who Have Chronic Illnesses. In C. Malchiodi, (Ed.). *Art therapy and healthcare*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Rappaport, L. (2014). *Mindfulness and the arts therapies: Theory and practice*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Rappaport, L. (2015). Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapies and Mindfulness with Children and Adolescents with Trauma. In C. Malchiodi, (Ed.) *Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children (Creative Arts and Play Therapy)*, Second edition. New York: Guilford Press.
- Rappaport, L. (2023). Focusing-oriented expressive arts. In C. Malchiodi, *Handbook of Expressive Arts Therapy*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Schaufeli, W. B., Martínez, I. M., Pinto, A. M., Salanova, M., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). Burnout and engagement in university students. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 33*(5), 464–481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220221020330050032002>

- Stuckey, H. L., & Nobel, J. (2010). The connection between art, healing, and public health: A review of current literature. *American Journal of Public Health, 100*(2), 254-263.
<https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.156497>
- Sutton, J. (2020). Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development explained. *Positive Psychology*. <https://positivepsychology.com/erikson-stages/>
- Vernon, L. (2022). *Toward holistic mental wellness: A literature review of mindfulness-based and focusing-oriented art therapies* (547) [Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses, Lesley University]. https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/547
- Weiland, L. (2012). *Focusing-oriented art therapy as a means of stress reduction with graduate students* [Master's thesis, Notre Dame de Namur University].
- Weiner, E. T. & Rappaport, L. (2014). Mindfulness and Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapy with Children and Adolescents. In L. Rappaport, (Ed.), *Mindfulness and the arts therapies: Theory and practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- What doctors wish patients knew about managing anxiety disorders*. (2023, September 28). American Medical Association. <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/what-doctors-wish-patients-knew-about-managing-anxiety-disorders#>
- World Health Organization. (2023). *Stress*. World Health Organization.
<https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/stress>
- Zhang, B., Wang, J., & Abdullah, A. B. (2024). The effects of art therapy interventions on anxiety in children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Clinics, 79*, 100404.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clinsp.2024.100404>

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Lesley University
Mental Health and Wellbeing Area
Expressive Therapies Department
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA

Student's Name: Mikki Lane

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: The Impact of Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOAT®) on College Students Experiencing Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

Date of Graduation: May 17, 2025

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Raquel Chapin Stephenson