

Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy: A Mindfulness Based Approach

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I began practicing art therapy in 1975 and then, two years later learned a simple, yet profound method, *Focusing*-- created by renowned psychologist and philosopher, Eugene Gendlin (1981; 1996). Gendlin developed Focusing out of research that he conducted with Carl Rogers on what led psychotherapy to be successful. After analyzing hundreds of transcripts from therapy sessions, they found that success of therapy did not correlate with a specific theoretical orientation but rather *how* the person spoke. Those clients who were able to speak with a sense of *how* they were from the “inside” below only the cognitive mind, were the ones who got better. Gendlin termed the phrase ‘felt sense’ to describe the inner place that successful clients spoke from and created Focusing as a method to teach people how to access it. Gendlin (1981) states,

[A felt sense is] A bodily experience of a situation, person, or event. An internal aura that encompasses everything you feel and know about a given subject at a given time—encompasses it and communicates it to you all at once rather than detail by detail (p.32).

As I continued to learn Gendlin’s Focusing method, it was clear to me that Gendlin’s Focusing and *felt sense* naturally occurred during the art process. In fact, Gendlin’s description of the felt sense sounds similar to Wadeson’s (1980) concept of spatial matrix—“...In a picture I can portray [experience] all at once” (p. 11). However, I discovered that Focusing added something to my clinical skills as an art

therapist that I didn't learn in the Arts Therapies field. Focusing cultivates a mindfulness and compassionate acceptance, strengthens the ability for therapist and client to "sit with" difficult experience while carefully navigating the unfolding experiential process, and facilitates access to one's innate wisdom and creative intelligence.

After combining Focusing with the arts therapies for over 30 years with a variety of clients in different settings (e.g. psychiatric, trauma, anxiety, depression, illness, wellness, private practice, schools, prison, etc.), I developed a theoretical and practice framework, Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT) and Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy (FOEAT) (Rappaport, 2009). Since there are basic steps and three main approaches to FOAT that are too in-depth to cover in this article, I will briefly summarize the main concepts followed by a case example.

FOAT Main Concepts

The Focusing Attitude: The Focusing Attitude begins with mindful awareness toward the bodily *felt sense* experience and being 'friendly' to whatever is there -- stresses and difficult feelings, as well as uplifting joyous qualities. Within the Focusing Attitude, the therapist helps the client to "sit down next to their inner felt sense" and to keep it company in a 'friendly', accepting way.

The Focusing Attitude is akin to mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn (2003) describes mindfulness as, "...the awareness that emerges through paying attention...in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (pp. 145-146).

Felt Sense—described above

Symbol/Handle: an image, word, phrase, gesture, or sound that matches the felt sense (as a way to describe the bodily felt sense)

Resonate: Checking the symbol/handle, art materials and process for a sense of rightness.

Ask: During FOAT, the therapist may ask the client to inwardly ask the felt sense (or art) a question. This elicits an inner dialogue to access meaning and inner knowing.

Receive: After posing the question to the inner felt sense (or art), the client receives, and welcomes what comes.

Felt Shift: When bringing the Focusing Attitude (friendliness, acceptance) to a felt sense, there is often a change...or felt shift. In FOAT, the felt shift is seen in the art.

Life Forward Direction: Focusing and art therapy access a natural life forward direction. Gendlin (1981) states, "Your body knows the direction of healing and life...If you take the time to listen to it through Focusing, it will give you the steps in the right direction" (p).

Example:

Heather was a graduate student diagnosed with a chronic illness in which she experienced a great amount of physical pain. As Heather learned about The Focusing Attitude, she became aware that she thought of her pain with anger and hatred. During a group exercise, I guided the class to bring the Focusing Attitude toward a felt sense of what they were each experiencing in the moment:

Focusing Attitude: "Take a few deep breaths down inside to your body....see if you can be friendly or accepting to what's there right now."

Felt Sense: Ask inside, "What's the whole feel of it?"

Symbol/Handle: See if there's an image (or word, phrase, gesture, or sound) that matches or acts like a handle for the inner felt sense?

Resonate: Check it for a sense of rightness. If it's not right, let it go and invite a new image to come.

Heather received an image of red outline of body with a creature in it (figure 1).



Figure 1. Focusing Attitude towards illness

Heather describes her art and felt sense:

"I drew a red outline of a human figure with a creature with sharp black claws inside of it. The creature was clawing and scratching inside the body, leaving bloody, red scratch marks. I began to understand, that the creature was clawing and scratching inside the body because it was trapped and scared and confused. It wasn't evil and it meant no harm. It was innocent and as terrorized as I... and it was simply trying to get free."

In FOAT, the process can continue, alternating between Focusing, felt sense, image, art, asking and receiving (dialogue). Reflective listening is integrated throughout.

Asking: I guided the group to Focus again: “Take another few deep breaths into your body...Imagine that this issue were all resolved. What would it look feel like in your body? See if there’s an image (symbol/handle) that matches the inner felt sense.

Receiving: Heather received an image of a blue figure, surrounded in yellow light (figure 2).



Figure 2. Imagining Illness All Healed

Heather shares:

“Now the figure is blue and is cradling that same creature, now curled and sleeping softly in its arms. The claw marks from the previous drawing are still visible inside the

figure but now they are black instead of red, symbolizing healing scars rather than fresh wounds. Seeing my pain as innocent and frightened led me to have more compassion for myself as I came to understand the pain as an aspect of myself. In cradling the creature, I was actually cradling the vulnerable part of myself that was frightened and hurting.

Further questions can be directed to the felt sense to access the body's wisdom and creative intelligence:

Ask inside, "What's needed (to get from the first image to the second)?"



Figure 3. What's needed for healing?

Receiving: Heather shares:

"I had a felt sense of healing in my body. An image of a nurse with wings carrying the I.V. with the medicine came. It was then that I decided to continue to treat my disease aggressively even though more aggressive treatments had more side effects.

Something in me knew this was the right way to set free the hurting creature inside of me. My felt sense led me to the decision...to make it and follow through with it...rather than passively going along with whatever the doctors suggested. I felt empowered. Through FOAT I felt a renewed sense of self-care and forgiveness."

Life Forward Direction

As can be seen in the case example, FOAT helped the student to become mindful of her negative attitude towards her illness, become more accepting of it, leading to greater self-compassion. This transformation is seen in the art work, which marks the *felt shifts*—changes. The Focusing Attitude fosters mindful, acceptance, and cultivates greater self-compassion. Reflective listening is integral in FOAT. As Mindfulness teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (2009) states, "Compassionate listening brings about healing" (p. 84). As in mindfulness, FOAT, elicits insight and a process for internal resolution as seen in Heather's deep knowing to choose a medical treatment for healing while clearly seeing its side effects.

Gendlin (1981) states, "Creative people have probably always used this [Focusing] method. What is really new in it is the specificity which we can describe the steps and teach them" (p. 33). Gendlin's (1981) *Focusing* started as a little book and is now taught and practiced worldwide—with applications for peace and psychosocial wellness in Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, Iran, and more. *Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy* is the first book on the integration of art therapy and Focusing. It is now translated into Japanese with trainings in the U.S., Hong Kong, and Japan. My hope is that the alchemical power of art combined with the wisdom of Focusing

will continue to water the seeds of our compassionate, creative intelligence --
unfolding personal healing and global transformation.

References

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