

FOCUSING-ORIENTED ART THERAPY

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*“Creative people have probably always used this method. What is really new...
is the specificity to describe the steps and teach them.*

— Eugene T. Gendlin

Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy is a theoretical and methodological approach that synthesizes Gendlin’s Focusing method, the principles of Focusing-Oriented Therapy, and Art Therapy theory and practice (Gendlin, 1981a; 1996). I coined the phrase, Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy, as a recognized approach within the field of art therapy.

Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy is used with individuals, couples, families, and groups in a variety of settings such as psychiatric hospitals, day treatment programs, nursing homes, schools, prisons, and more. Although Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT) is a new term, the application of combining Focusing with art therapy has been explored by both Focusing therapists (Ikemi, Yano, Miyake, and Matsuoka, 2007; Leijssen, 1992; Marder, 1997; Murayama, 1988; Neagu, 1988; and Tsuchie, 2003), as well as expressive arts therapists (Merkur, 1997; Rappaport, 1988, 1992, 1998, 2005, 2008, and Knill, 2004).

BRIDGING FOCUSING AND ART THERAPY

Focusing is a mind/body practice of bringing a welcoming, friendly attitude toward one’s felt sense of an issue, situation, or experience — and taking time to hear its messages and meaning. Gendlin describes this need to combine the inner directed movement of Focusing with something that helps the *felt sense, our embodied knowing of*, to move outward. He states, “If therapy deals only with inner data, whether emotion or felt sense, it misses a crucial dimension of the process of change. Therapy must involve more than Focusing on inner data in reflective inner space. There also needs to be a movement outward, into interaction, Focusing as such does not sufficiently provide the moving out” (1991, p. 267).

The creative synthesis of integrating Focusing with art therapy is a perfect balance for accessing the inner felt sense while unfolding its wisdom through creative expression. Focusing and Art Therapy share common aspects, contributing to the ease of their integration. Both Focusing and art therapy arise out of our innate humanness. Focusing accesses the inner sanctum of our ongoing experiential process, while art is a natural expression for communication of life’s meaning. Although the profession of Art Therapy dates back to the 1940’s, its roots are traced back to indigenous cultures where the arts were integrated into daily life (Kramer, 2000; Malchiodi, 2003; Naumburg, 1950, 1953, 1966; Rubin, 1998; Ulman and Levy, 1981). This ancient and universal application of art is reflected in cave paintings, religious mandalas, Navajo sand paintings, rites of passage rituals, and in

healing ceremonies integrating decorative art with music and dance. Rhoda Kellogg (1967) noted universal characteristics in children's art cross culturally while Viktor Lowenfeld (1957) observed children's development expressed in predictable sequences in children's drawings.

Although Focusing and Art Therapy are different psychotherapeutic practices, they are both intrinsically compatible, as each model very naturally accesses the *felt sense* — a term coined by Gendlin to describe the experiential dimension that was discovered out of research with Carl Rogers on what led to successful psychotherapy (Gendlin, 1981a). In Focusing, the felt sense is accessed by bringing mindful attention along with a welcoming, friendly, accepting inner stance, known as “the Focusing Attitude.” towards an inner experience, i.e. sensations arising in the body.

Similarly, during an Art Therapy session, the felt sense is essentially engaged through the use of the body in artmaking. For example, the hand, arm, and torso are engaged while painting, drawing, or sculpting. The felt sense also implicitly informs color and material choice, the development of an image, and knowing when the art is completed. The “crossing” of the felt sense in Focusing and Art Therapy contribute to a natural creative synthesis, resulting in a comprehensive approach — Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy (FOAT). This article includes a summary of the foundational principles of FOAT, basic steps for symbolizing a felt sense in art, and an overview with case examples of the three basic approaches, namely, Clearing a Space with Art, Focusing-Oriented Art Psychotherapy, and Theme Directed FOAT. Benefits of FOAT are also included.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF FOCUSING-ORIENTED ART THERAPY (FOAT)

In keeping with Gendlin's approach, the underlying principles of FOAT emphasize the client's sense of safety first, above all interventions. Of primary importance is “the person in there.” Gendlin states, “In my student days, one of the most useful things anyone told me was: ‘There is always a person in there.’ In infants and in senile people, seemingly worthless people, and seemingly stupid children there *is* ‘someone in there’. Usually it is an embattled person struggling to live somehow with (or in spite of) all the inner and the outer content” (1996, p. 287). Safety for the “person in there” is established through therapeutic presence, the Focusing Attitude, clinical sensitivity, grounding, and reflection:

- 1. Therapeutic Presence:** This step begins with the therapist's awareness of his or her own state: Are you willing to be here? Are you willing to welcome and meet the “person in there”? Can you be mindful of your own issues and states of mind? Can you be friendly to your own self and the client's felt sense?
- 2. The Focusing Attitude:** A friendly, welcoming, accepting attitude is directed toward both the felt sense and unfolding Focusing process, as well as toward the creative process and art product.
- 3. Clinical Sensitivity:** It is important to be mindful of the needs of the clinical population you are working with and to adapt Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy accord-

ingly. For example, when working with clients who have experienced trauma or have severe mental illness, it is advisable to begin with eyes open, and not encourage closing the eyes until safety and grounding is firmly established within the client.

4. **Grounding:** It is helpful to see that clients can establish a safe connection with their body — being aware of their breath coming in and out of their body; body awareness, such as feet touching the floor, noticing where their hands are resting, etc.
5. **Reflection:** The therapist demonstrates empathic understanding in response to the client’s verbal, nonverbal, and artistic communication. Reflection can occur through:
 - a. *experiential listening*, in which the therapist says back to the client the heart and essence of their communication.
 - b. *artistic mirroring*, in which the therapist may reflect understanding through an artistic reflection (e.g. drawing a shape, using a color, or creating an image).
 - c. *movement mirroring*, in which the therapist conveys understanding through nonverbal body movement or gesture.

SYMBOLIZING THE FELT SENSE IN ART

A basic step to integrate Art Therapy into Focusing is to express the felt sense in visual art. This requires bringing the Focusing Attitude (being friendly and welcoming) toward a felt sense, finding a handle/symbol as an image (or word, phrase, gesture, or sound), and expressing it in art (figure 1). If the symbol comes as a word, phrase, or gesture, the client is encouraged to express it in visual art through size, color, shape, etc. This process of listening to the felt sense and seeing whether there is an image that matches it is the source and inspiration for art making.

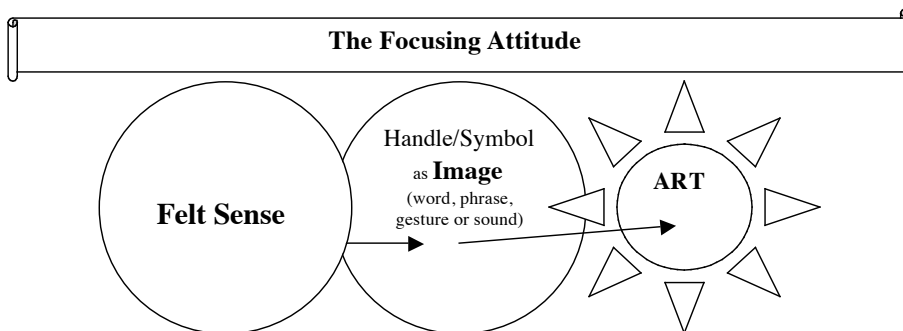


Figure 1: Expressing the Handle/Symbol in Art

FOAT APPROACHES

Gendlin's Focusing method is adapted to create three basic approaches in FOAT (Note: FOAT is an umbrella term covering the three approaches below): Clearing a Space with Art, Focusing-Oriented Art Psychotherapy, and Theme Directed FOAT. *Clearing a Space with Art* helps clients to have an experiential knowing that there is a self, separate from their issues, and that there is a place of inherent wholeness within. It is useful for stress reduction, as well as an entry point to the other two approaches. *Focusing-Oriented Art Psychotherapy* (more of an in-depth therapy) is primarily applied to individual and couples' therapy where the issues arise out of the client's experiencing and the orientation is toward insight. A *Theme-Directed* approach is primarily used with groups, in which topics related to the groups needs, such as strengths, fears, hopes, life balance, and so forth are explored.

Table 1 shows how Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy corresponds to Gendlin's six-step Focusing method (Gendlin, 1981a), followed by Basic Instructions for guiding FOAT.

Table 1: Gendlin's Focusing Steps and Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy

Gendlin's 6 Step Focusing Method	Focusing	Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy
1. Clearing A Space	Inwardly sense what's in the way of feeling all fine	Clearing a Space with Art Use art materials to set things at a distance; artistic representation of "All-Fine Place"
2. Choose Something to work on and finding a Felt Sense	Choose something from issues set aside during Clearing A Space	Focusing-Oriented Art Psychotherapy Choose something from issues set aside during Clearing A Space; or begin with this step: "What's needing my attention right now?" Theme Directed: Focus on theme; Get a felt sense
3. Handle/Symbol	Handle: word, phrase, image, gesture, sound	Handle: Image (or word, phrase, gesture, sound)
4. Resonate	Check handle against felt sense to see if it is right	Check handle against felt sense to see if it is right; Sense the right art materials to match the felt sense; Express handle/symbol in art

<p>5. Ask</p>	<p>Ask the felt sense questions: What makes it so _____? What's the crux of it? What would it be like if it were all resolved? What's in the way? What's needed? What's a small step in the right direction?</p>	<p>Ask the felt sense questions: What makes it so _____? What's the crux of it? What would it be like if it were all resolved? What's in the way? What's needed? What's a small step in the right direction?</p> <p>Dialogue with art: What do you have to say to me? What do you need? Dialogue with different parts Gestalt the art Active imagination Felt Sense of Art (word, phrase, gesture, sound) into intermodal transfer</p>
<p>6. Receive</p>	<p>Receive and welcome what comes (from the felt sense)</p>	<p>Receive and welcome what comes from the felt sense and from the art</p>

Exercise 1: Basic Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy Guided Instructions

1. Clearing A Space:

Take a few deep breaths down inside of your body. Feel the support of the chair that you're sitting on, the earth beneath your feet, and being here. Follow your breath inside of your body and notice how it is inside right now. . . Is it jumpy, or calm, tight, warm . . . or something else? See if you can be friendly to whatever you find. Imagine you're sitting somewhere peaceful. It may a place you already know or one that you make up in your imagination. Once you have that place, ask, "What's between me and feeling 'All Fine' right now?" As each thing comes up, imagine wrapping it up into a package, or using other imagery to set it at a distance from you. Some people imagine placing it on a boat and then letting the boat go a certain distance out on a lake. Others imagine placing it in a balloon and letting it go up in the sky. . . *(Pause)*. When the list stops, check again, "Except for all of that, I'm all fine, right?" If something else comes up, set that a distance outside of your body . . . *(Pause)*.

Background Feeling: See if there's a background feeling, an *always* feeling, like *always* kind of tense, or *always* kind of anxious." (*Pause*) . . . and set that at a comfortable distance too. . . Check again, "Except for all of that, I'm all fine...all right?"

All Fine Place: Take a moment and sense the "All Fine" Place. See if there's an image (or word, phrase, gesture, or sound) that matches or acts like a handle for the inner felt sense. (Option: Stop here and create art from Step 1).

2. Choosing something to work on and getting a felt sense:

As you look over at the things you set down, see if there's something needing your attention right now. You can ask your body sense if something is wanting your attention — or you can choose something that you'd like to work on. Check with your body to see if you have its permission to Focus on it.

Felt Sense: Take a moment to sense the whole issue freshly . . . notice how it feels in your body. (*Pause*). Gently ask, "What's the whole feel of this?"

3. Finding a Handle/Symbol:

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

4. Resonate with Artistic Expression:

Check your word, phrase, gesture or sound for a sense of rightness within your body. If it doesn't feel right, let it go and invite a new word, phrase, image, gesture, or sound to come. When you're ready, gently open your eyes, and create an artistic expression of your felt sense image. (Option: to continue to the end of the guided Focusing and create art at the end).

5. Asking the Felt Sense:

(*After the client creates art*). We're going to ask the felt sense some questions. Some it will answer and some won't have relevance, so simply let those go. Feel free to close your eyes or to leave them open. Imagine sitting down next the felt sense, keeping it company. In a gentle way, ask it,

What makes it so _____?

What's the crux of it? Or, What's the main thing about it?

What's the worst of it?

- Imagine for a moment that this issue were all resolved. This is like looking the answer up in the back of the book. Sense inside your body what it

would look and feel like if this were all resolved? See if there's an image that matches or act like a handle for the inner felt sense of this issue all resolved.

When you're ready, ask:

- What's in the way (between the issue and resolution)?
- What's needed (to achieve this resolution)?
- What's one small step in the right direction?

6. Receive:

Welcome whatever comes. Create an artistic expression that matches the colors, shapes, or images that you received during the Focusing. Include what was meaningful to you during the Focusing.

CLEARING A SPACE WITH ART

In *Clearing a Space with Art*, the client identifies the issues that stand in the way of feeling “all fine” and imagines placing them at a distance outside of the body. Imagery is incorporated in helping to clear the space. For example, the client might imagine wrapping each issue up in a package and placing it at a comfortable distance, or putting a concern or problem on a boat and letting it float out on a lake. Art is incorporated in order to concretize and symbolize the felt sense of the issues being set aside. After clearing the issues, the client gets a felt sense of the “all fine place” and symbolizes it in art. At times, clients feel they have already set their issues aside, using their imaginations, and prefer only to create the “all fine place.”

Nicole, describes the painting (Figure 2) that came out of her experience of doing the Clearing a Space exercise:



Figure 2 : “Clearing a Space” by Nicole

“In the image, I am blowing bubbles and watching them float away to a comfortable distance. Each bubble represents a different issue and concern. The beach is painted with bright colors of turquoise, pink, orange, and yellow — it is optimistic. I currently have the picture in my room, and when I am stressed I find myself looking at it. Through the image I am able to connect to my ‘all fine place’ and find solitude.”

Art Materials for Clearing A Space

A variety of art materials can be used, depending on the needs of the client population. For example, clients in a more regressed state will need to use art materials that are more controlled, such as pencils or markers as compared to watercolors. Higher functioning clients may enjoy a wide range of materials. Examples of art materials include: drawing materials, paint, assorted color papers to represent issues, clay, dough, modeling materials, found objects, boxes, containers, bags, yarn, twine, magazine photos and words.

FOCUSING-ORIENTED ART PSYCHOTHERAPY

In Focusing-Oriented Art Psychotherapy, art therapy can be integrated into Focusing instructions (such as Gendlin’s six-steps, Cornell, 1996, 2002; Hinterkopf, 1998) or interspersed in bits and pieces during a Focusing-Oriented psychotherapy encounter. The following example demonstrates how art therapy is integrated with Gendlin’s six-steps by inviting the client to express the handle of the felt sense as an image in visual art.

EXAMPLE: SARAH

Sarah is a 48 year old woman, a cancer survivor who came to see me for art therapy. Her goals were to learn tools for stress reduction and re-prioritize what holds meaning to her after facing a life threatening illness. Excerpts of dialogue are provided to demonstrate how Focusing and art therapy are integrated with each other into the session.

1. Clearing a Space:

Imagine you are in a peaceful place. It may be a place you know or it may be one you create in your imagination... When you’re ready, ask, “What’s in the way between me and feeling all fine right now?” As each thing comes up, imagine placing it at some distance from you... perhaps on a park bench... or on a boat that you can go a certain distance on a lake... as each thing arises, place it at a comfortable distance from you.

Sarah: *There’s friction with my partner... not exercising... the desire to have meaningful work.*

Therapist: *(After I say back the issues): Imagine wrapping each one up in a package and setting it at a comfortable distance away from you. Now check freshly... Aside*

from all of that, see if you are feeling “all fine”. (Sarah indicates “yes”. I invite her to see if there’s a background feeling, an ‘always’ feeling, in the way):

Sarah: *There’s the fear of a recurrence...*

Therapist: *See if you can be friendly to that fear... Can you imagine placing that at a distance from you with the others.*

Sarah: *Yes.* (Sarah indicates that she has set all the things in the way of feeling “all fine”).

Therapist: *See if there is a word, phrase, image, gesture, or sound that matches the felt sense of the “all fine place”.*

Sarah: *In my center, I see a yellow radiant ball of light.* Sarah creates the image (Figure 3):



Figure 3

Accessing the ball of light helps Sarah connect with her life affirming energy. We can stay with this step, Clearing a Space, or Sarah can move on if she would like to work on an issue.

2. Choose an Issue and Felt Sense:

(Sarah chooses to work on the fear of the cancer recurrence.)

Therapist: *Let your attention come down inside your body to the place of fear. See if you can be friendly to it. Imagine sitting down next it... sense the whole feel of it... see if there’s a word, phrase, image, gesture, or sound that matches the inner felt sense.*

3. Symbol/Handle: image (or word, phrase, gesture, sound)

Sarah opens her eyes, creates a rolled thin shape using model magic with a balloon shape at the end (Figure 4).



Figure 4

Sarah: *The thin part is the tightness in my throat—where the fear lives.*

4. Resonate:

(Pointing to the tight part in the art): This is the tightness in your throat where the fear lives. Check to see if the image and art materials match the felt sense.

5. Asking the felt sense:

Therapist: *Go back inside to the tightness and fear, keeping it company. Ask, “What makes it so tight and afraid?”*

6. Receive:

Sarah: *When I’m stressed, I get afraid the cancer will come back.*

(Alternating Asking and Receiving)...

Therapist: *You’re afraid the cancer will return when you are stressed. Can you ask it what it needs?*

Sarah: *It says singing helps.*

Therapist: *Would it like to sing now or would it like to imagine singing?*

Sarah: *It says it would like to imagine singing.*

Therapist: *Imagine a time when you were singing. Notice what it feels like in your body to sing. See if there’s an image, gesture, or sound that matches the inner felt sense...*

Sarah begins with a green oil pastel drawing from the bottom of the page upward and outward, with flowing open movements, adding yellow, red, purple, and blue (Figure 5).

Sarah: *When I imagined singing, the energy just went up — there was a release.*



Figure 5

(I set the two drawings next to each other.)

Sarah: *They're so different! The second one has such a healing feeling. I need to give this to myself. When I am afraid... this is something I can do... just imagining myself singing changes the feeling. I keep hearing, "I can't forget this. This is going to save my life."*

As I view the profound shift from the tight, restricted image of the first artistic expression to the open, flowing radiance of the second, Sarah's words, "This is going to save my life" reverberates throughout me. How powerful to be able to transform the energy and emotional state of fear to self-empowerment and hopeful possibility.

Therapist: *If you'd like, you can take your art and put it in a place you see everyday. The yellow ball of light can remind you of the place inside that is separate from all the stressors—your inner radiance. The drawing can remind you of the 'healing feeling' and to sing, or imagine singing to reduce the fear and stress.*

Four years have passed since this session; Sarah is living well, cancer free, and is a proud new mom!

THEME-DIRECTED FOAT

In Theme Directed FOAT, specific themes are selected to coordinate with the needs of a group or client. Instead of an issue arising from choosing something that was 'set aside' during Clearing A Space, a topic is chosen on which to Focus. This approach is useful for group work where the entire group can be led through a group Focusing at once. Focusing instructions can be amended to fit the needs of the clinical population (e.g. not closing eyes, helping the directions to be more concrete, etc.). Theme Directed groups can vary from one session to a specified number of weeks.

The following group is based on a twelve-week Theme Directed Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy approach on stress reduction with adult psychiatric clients in day treatment (see Table 2 for content outline). The overall design of the group follows, including the format, and one example.

Table 2: Group Themes and Skills: 12 weeks

Week	Theme	Goal
1	Introduction to Stress Management: goals of the group; psycho-educational presentation on stress management; Peaceful Place Exercise	Introduce members to group goals and each other; learn method of relaxation; express felt sense and see felt shift in art
2 and 3	Identifying and Releasing Bodily Tension	Learn a second relaxation exercise; mind/body awareness of stress and relaxation; felt sense and felt shift
4 and 5	Clearing a Space for Stress Reduction	Learn the first step of Focusing: stress reduction and wellbeing
6 and 7	Focusing Steps: Choosing an Issue to Work On	Learn how to work on an issue and identify steps towards change—felt sense art.
8-12	Practice: Relaxation, Focusing, Art Therapy Skills from Previous Weeks	Reinforce learning relaxation, Focusing and art therapy methods for self-care.

The group followed a similar overall format each week in which both Focusing and art therapy were implemented:

- Check-in
- Focusing Stress Check-in: identify tension in the body/symbolize as an image
- Draw felt sense image of stress
- Stress reduction exercise
- Focusing: identify tension in the body/symbolize as an image
- Drawing what the felt sense now
- Sharing

After introducing the group members to each other and stating the purpose of the group, the therapist led the group in a Focusing-Check-in to notice the places of stress and tension in the body, to get a felt sense as an image, and to express it in art. Afterwards, the therapist guided the group in the “Peaceful Place” exercise, followed by Focusing to get a felt sense as an image, and then to symbolize it in art.

Exercise 2: Focusing Stress Check-In

Take a few deep breaths into your body. Follow your breath down inside to your body and notice any places that feel tense or stressed. See if you can be friendly to whatever is there. Now, see if there's an image that acts like a handle for the inner felt sense of the stress or tension. Check it for a sense of rightness. When you're ready, draw the felt sense image.

Exercise 3: Peaceful Place and "Being friendly"

Imagine that you are somewhere peaceful. It may be a place that you know, or one that you make up in your imagination. Sense how it feels in your body . . . being friendly to what you find . . . (Pause). Now, see if there's an image that matches the inner felt sense. When you are ready, draw the felt sense image.

Lisa is a forty-three-year old client with a history of bipolar disorder. Lisa's first felt sense image (Figure.6) is a red, constricted vertical shape which she describes as a knot in her stomach.

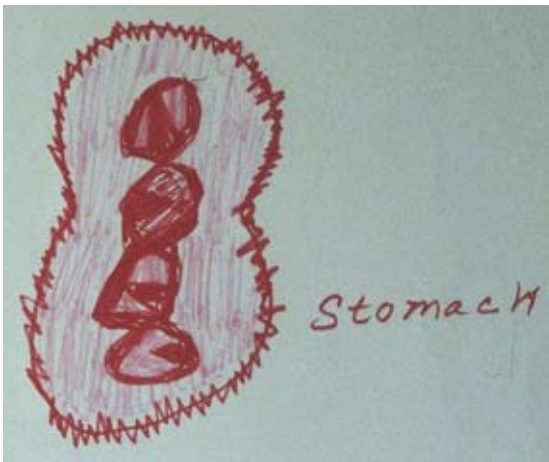


Figure 6: Lisa, Felt Sense, Stress



Figure 7: Lisa, Peaceful Place

After imagining the issue resolved, Lisa's felt-sense image is transformed into a soft, strong yellow flower with a smooth, figure eight shape around it (Figure 7). Lisa shares, "I felt the tension in my stomach relax and change to peace."

FELT SHIFT IN THE BODY AND ART

Visual art conveys the felt sense, documents the felt shift, and carries the experience forward, as reflected in the case examples of Sarah and Lisa. While the felt shift can be seen in the changes from one piece of art to another, it is important to have the client notice the changes in the body. In Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy there is a back and forth checking in with the body, image, art materials, body, image and so forth. It is similar to the “zigzag” that Gendlin (2004) discusses, with the addition of art work. The power of viewing the felt sense visually is that client and therapist can view the exact same image that represents the felt sense — thereby increasing empathic understanding. In addition, the client can see how her inner experience has changed. The client sees a change in the image or the aesthetics, such as color, shape, media, etc. The client also has a visual reminder of the change and steps toward growth and healing.

INTEGRATING THE OTHER EXPRESSIVE ARTS

While this article emphasizes Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy, the basic theoretical framework and methodology is applicable to all of the expressive arts. The key element, symbolizing the felt sense, is the doorway to all of the arts.

Symbol/Handle	Expressive Arts Modality
Word or phrase ----- <i>develops into</i> -----	a poem or creative writing
Image ----- <i>develops into</i> -----	visual art
Gesture ----- <i>develops into</i> -----	movement or dance
Sound ----- <i>develops into</i> -----	music or sound exploration

CONCLUSION

In sum, the benefits of FOAT are as follows:

- Art externalizes, concretizes, and symbolizes a felt sense.
- The physical act of drawing helps the felt sense to open and move, thus bringing about a felt shift—enhancing the Life Forward Direction.
- The art product enables both the client (Focuser) and therapist to see the same image that symbolizes the felt sense.
- The visual art is a mirror of where the felt sense began, where the felt shifts occurred, and where it ended in the session.
- The art product can serve as a tangible reference point to review — to see growth and change (felt shifts).
- The client can take the art product with them as a reminder to integrate the experience into life.

- The felt sense grounds imagery with the body.
- The felt sense can guide the artistic process — informing choice of materials, colors, shapes, textures, and imagery.
- The felt sense unfolds the body's next steps (towards healing, change, wellness, etc.)
- The felt sense opens the door to the body's wisdom and creativity.

The many benefits experienced by clients demonstrate that Focusing and Art Therapy enhance one another. Art Therapy brings to Focusing an array of methods, tools, and materials, as well as an in-depth understanding of the healing power of imagery to give visual expression to the felt sense. Art Therapy also provides Focusing with a nonverbal modality to capture aspects of the felt sense beyond words, or before words. From the other direction, Focusing offers Art Therapy some awareness of the bodily felt experience and provides depth for working psychotherapeutically with concepts such as “the person in there”, presence, experiential listening, the therapeutic relationship, and the experiential dimension.

Note: This article includes excerpts from Laury Rappaport's newly published book, *Focusing-oriented art therapy: Accessing the body's wisdom and creative intelligence*, 2008, reprinted with permission from Jessica Kinglsey Publishers.

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