

FOCUSING AND ART THERAPY:

TOOLS FOR WORKING THROUGH POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

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Focusing Folio, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1998

Focusing and art therapy are both tools and processes that can stand by themselves as helpful approaches to working with post-traumatic stress disorder. In this article, I will address how to combine focusing with art therapy to help provide a safe container to hold and facilitate forward movement, or felt shift of the post-traumatic stress response. Because post-traumatic stress covers a wide range of experience, (e.g. post-war, sexual abuse, therapist abuse, physical accidents, etc), I will focus this article on post-traumatic stress associated with child sexual abuse.

As Judith Herman states,

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections ... The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author of her own recovery." (1992, p. 133)

Focusing offers a way of listening to the inner self, to the felt sense, that helps the client to be the author of her or his own recovery. Art therapy provides concrete expression of the focusing process that serves as a visual guide and reminder of where to go on the journey of recovery. The art making provides a safe container to hold the felt experience; the art image serves to document the felt sense. The action of focusing with art therapy serves to help the experience to move forward, marked by the felt shift.

I organize the process of focusing and art therapy into Judith Herman's three stage model of recovery: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. As Herman discusses, the stages do not necessarily unfold linearly. The work within the various stages can be used to correlate with Gendlin's steps in focusing: clearing a space, felt sense, finding a handle, resonate, ask, and receive (Gendlin, 1988). Herman's stages help to understand the tasks of the therapist working with the various stages of healing through post-traumatic stress disorder.

First, I will address the aspects of focusing that need to be considered at each of Herman's three stages. The next section deals with the application of art therapy with focusing to the stages, followed by a case vignette and reflections of a therapist (survivor) who also works with survivors using focusing and art therapy.

FOCUSING RELATED TO HERMAN'S THREE STAGES OF HEALING

Stage I: Creating Safety

I. The first step in working with clients who have post-traumatic stress disorder is to assess their level of safety to connect and look inside the body. Often with post-traumatic stress disorder, clients are overwhelmed by the feelings and experience of the traumatic memories, conscious or unconscious. Since the experience is carried or held in the body, clients need to know that they can feel safe connecting with the body.

2. It is important that clients have the permission and acceptance to keep eyes open during the focusing process if they choose to. Often, particularly clients with sexual abuse need to be able to see what is happening around themselves in order to feel safe. Many clients experience a hyper vigilance of watching in order to feel safe.

3. While it is understood in the focusing process that the focuser (client) is in charge of the experience, it is critical for survivors of sexual abuse to know they are in charge of their experience. It is important for the client to know she or he decides whether it is safe to look within, and for how long.

Stage II: Remembrance and Mourning (Working through the Trauma)

I. Once the client feels safe to connect with the body, to notice and listen to the felt sense inside, the client may be ready to begin working through the traumatic experience. This phase involves awareness of the traumatic experience(s), expression, verbally or non verbally about the experience, exploration of the effects on current level of functioning, and gentle guiding into the felt sense of the experience.

Stage III: Reconnection with Ordinary Life

I. This stage of healing is characterized by helping the client to do the things in life, or create the life, that she or he truly wants. Focusing is on the forward movement of the client's life. This stage is characterized by asking and receiving from the felt sense.

APPLICATION OF FOCUSING AND ART THERAPY TO HERMAN'S THREE STAGES OF HEALING

Stage I: Creating Safety Using Focusing and Art Therapy

Clearing A Space may be used during this phase of healing. Possible ways of facilitating clearing a space using focusing and art therapy:

I. **Safe Space:** Imagine a place of safety. It may be one that you already know, or it may be one that you can create in your imagination. Describe that place to your self.. .the images, the colors, the sounds or silences, the temperature, the whole feel of it. Once you describe it to yourself, begin to sense the whole feel of that safety inside your body ... What is the whole feel of the safety within your body? See if there is an image, or word or phrase to describe that place.

Using art materials (markers, craypas, paper, magazine pictures, etc.) create an image of the felt sense of the safe place.

Once the client does this step, it may be fine to just stop here. This is an important step in creating a safe place within that the client can always choose to return to, whenever she or he needs to.

2. **Safe Space/Creating Distance:** Once the client creates the safe space, and can clearly make connection to it when she or he needs to, then the client can move to place all the things between her/him and feeling all fine. Beginning with the safe place, in the art form, the client uses the art materials to symbolize the issues in the way of feeling all fine. Possibilities include, drawing symbols of each issue, or writing, onto pieces of construction paper; tearing or cutting into shapes papers to represent each issue; or using clay, beads, or other objects to symbolize the issues.

These objects or papers are then placed at a distance that feels right to the client, from the safe place.

The client resonates, or checks inside for a feeling of rightness as well as to check whether there is some more space inside.

3. The Protector: Another art therapy tool to help facilitate safety, is for survivors of sexual abuse to invite the image or presence of a protector, based on a real person or protector in their life, or imagined. Describe the *image* of that protector to yourself. Sense what that feels like inside your body ... What is the 'whole feel of it? See if there is an image that matches or acts like a handle for the protector. .. When you're ready, draw/create an image that matches, or acts like a handle for that protector.

If the client connects with the image/art piece, it may be helpful to have the drawing/image present during subsequent sessions.

Stage II: Remembrance and Mourning (Working Through the Trauma) Using Focusing and Art Therapy

Listening to the felt sense, finding the handle, and resonating are used during this stage of healing. The client chooses what to focus on-which may be after clearing a space and choosing an issue, or it may be interwoven into the unfolding therapeutic process (e.g. the client is talking and the therapist suggests checking inside).

When the client focuses on the experience, invite the client to sense the whole feel of it in her or his body. See if there is an image that matches or acts like a handle for the inner felt sense. Using markers, craypas, paint, or other art materials, create the image of the felt sense. While creating the art, the client resonates the handle (image/symbol), checking for a right fit.

STAGE III: RECONNECTION WITH ORDINARY LIFE USING FOCUSING AND ART THERAPY

Felt Sense, Finding a Handle, Resonating. Asking. and Receiving are the focusing steps mostly used during this stage of healing.

Imagine this issue (or the thing being worked on) is all healed. What would that look and feel like? Sense that it your body. See if there is an image that matches or acts like a handle for the inner felt sense. Using markers, craypas, paint, or other art materials, create the *image* of the felt sense.

Ask it. .. so what's in the way of it being all healed? Allow time for the felt sense to answer.

Now ask, So what's needed to bring that about (the way she or he wants it to be)?

Allow time for the felt sense to answer.

Now ask, And what's a good step in the right direction? Again, allow time for the felt sense to answer.

Asking the felt sense questions, may be done with or without art-making.

VIGNETTE WITH A CLIENT

Stage I: Creating Safety:

Sarah had been in therapy for several years where she became aware of being sexually abused as a child. She worked through much of the difficult emotions that arise at this early stage of recovery. Therefore, in my assessment and hers, we were able to begin to work with focusing and art therapy.

I. Draw a Protector: Early on in the therapy, I invited Sarah to sense an image of a protector. ... someone or something that could offer you the feeling of protection ... feel free to keep your eyes open or closed ... pause once you have that image, sense what it would feel like in your body to feel that protection when you are ready, use the art materials to create the image.

Sarah felt comfortable closing her eyes. I stayed quiet and calm, accompanying her silently on her journey. She drew the following image in yellow:



Sarah liked the image and felt comforted by her. We brought the drawing to each session for the next several months. The drawing of the protector symbolizes the felt sense of the quality Sarah is developing within herself (as this was lost during the childhood sexual abuse). Bringing the drawing to subsequent sessions is symbolically a carrying forward of the felt experience.

Stage II: Remembrance and Mourning (Working through the Trauma):

Sarah is having a conflict at work with her boss. She is quite upset. As she speaks, I hear and empathically feel the upset. I ask her. "Would you like to check in and see how that feels and then maybe make a drawing of it?"

Yes.

She closes her eyes. I say, "Follow your attention down inside to your body. Being aware of the conflict with your boss, and the upset you were talking about, see how that feels in your body. See if there is an image that matches the inner felt sense of that."

Once you have it, then, if you'd like, use the art materials to make a picture of that. She opens her eyes ... and draws the following (large image in black and red; small shape in pink):



As we look at it together, Sarah describes herself feeling so little. She is the tiny pink shape on the lower right. Her boss is so big ... and inside she feels absolute terror.

I ask her if those feelings remind her of any others in her life. She says yes, the abuse.

I ask if she can listen inside to "little Sarah"?

She feels afraid. She's all huddled in a corner, crouching, trying to disappear. She feels ashamed.

Can you be accepting to her. Hand ask her what she needs.

She needs someone to tell her she's okay. It's okay to feel what she feels. She's safe. Can you draw that? Sarah draws:



We look at the drawing together. It is "little Sarah: surrounded by yellow protection and the affirming words, "You

are okay"; "It's okay to feel." Sarah describes feeling safe and calm ... and more accepting of those feelings. We look at the drawing together. It is "little Sarah: surrounded by yellow protection and the affirming words, "You are okay"; "It's okay to feel." Sarah describes feeling safe and calm ... and more accepting of those feelings.

Stage III: Reconnection with Ordinary Life:

I reflect back to Sarah that her current conflict with her boss is triggering the sexual abuse and thus feels more of the fear and shame that she felt as a child. Sarah agrees. We then use focusing to identify steps she can take to take care of the "little Sarah" when she is triggered at work. This last focusing step helps to bring closure to the session by bringing the focus back to the adult and present time.

Reflections from a therapist:

I'd like to share with you some reflections from a therapist, a survivor, using focusing and art therapy for self-care and as tools in therapy. I asked her if she would share with me what she finds helpful about using art therapy with focusing working with others. These are some of her reflections:

"The first thing that comes to mind, is that art is a great container for difficult feelings, especially difficult feelings, volatile feelings like anger and rage. With trauma the rage is really big ... I had never found a place that gave permission to just be with that (rage). The rage I witnessed was really scary so I was scared of my own. I could feel it inside. With the art I could really be with my rage -destroy the paper, rip the paper, poke the paper ... I could really be as destructive as I wanted to be (in a safe way).

And with using focusing, what is great about it is that you can really be with someone and still be private. It's like I can go through my own process in my own mind and my own body, and someone is accompanying me, and with me, but I don't have to share the details of it.

With dealing with trauma and abuse, there is a lot of shame and your privacy has been so invaded ... focusing gives you a way to be private and still have someone who can be with you and understand where you are. I have never found a form that gives me so much privacy and so much togetherness.

Conclusion:

I would like to conclude this paper with my own focusing reflection on this topic.

I feel an immense gratitude in my heart for knowing the healing and transformational powers of focusing and art therapy. I am also grateful to all of those who honored me with their presence and gifts, allowing me to accompany them on their healing journey. My hope is to be a voice in offering empowerment to those who have been wounded from post-traumatic stress and to offer the tools of focusing and art therapy as agents in the healing process.