

Focusing and Expressive Arts

Laury Rappaport, Ph.D., MFT, REAT, ATR-BC

www.focusingarts.com

Email: office@focusingarts.com

I. What is Focusing?

"Focusing is the process of listening to your body in a gentle, accepting way and hearing the messages that your inner self is sending you. It's a process of honoring the wisdom that you have inside of you, becoming aware of the subtle level of knowing that speaks to you through your body" (Cornell, 1996, p.3).

Focusing, created by Eugene Gendlin, is a mind/body method of listening in a gentle, compassionate way to the wholeness of our being and accessing the inherent wisdom of the body. Focusing can be used for body-mind centering, enhancing emotional wellness, decision-making, creative expression, spirituality, relationships, and peace-making, while cultivating compassion and gaining insight. Through Focusing, one deepens a relationship with the authentic self, cultivates self-acceptance, and strengthens relationships through increased compassion and presence. Focusing can be used a tool for self-care on one's own and/or done with others through a Focusing Partnership or group.

History of Focusing

The Focusing method developed out of research by Eugene Gendlin and Carl Rogers (Purton, 2004; Gendlin, 1981,1996) as a way to teach others what successful clients do within themselves to show improvement in therapy. Quantitative measures, including the experiencing scale (Klein, et al 1969), and qualitative findings revealed that those who had a way of accessing their inner experience, along with a way of resonating it for a sense of rightness, were the ones who demonstrated success in psychotherapy. Gendlin developed a six-step method which he called Focusing to teach others what those successful clients did within themselves naturally (Gendlin, 1981, 1996).

Basic Concepts of Focusing

- **Focusing Attitude:**
 - "being friendly to"
 - welcoming
 - accepting
 - keeping company with...(what is inside)
 - compassionate
 - listening
 - curious (oh...that's there...interesting...)

- **Felt Sense:** bodily experience from the inside of an issue, situation or experience. A felt sense can be about anything...difficult issues and feelings and pleasant, positive, experience.
 - *"The felt sense is a wonderful phenomenon. It contains all of your inner knowing about a given situation and that which you do not yet know about yourself. Your felt sense can lead you to your next growth step. It can even sense an answer that has not yet been experienced."* (Gendlin, 1986).
- **Symbol (Handle):** Once a felt sense is noticed, see if there is a symbol or handle that matches the inner felt experience. A symbol or handle may come in the form of:
 - **a word, phrase, image, gesture, or sound.**
- **Felt Shift**—after getting a felt sense, there is often a felt shift—a change or shift...which can be as subtle as slight change in the breath or a more dramatic experience in the body.

Focusing Method originally developed by Eugene Gendlin

The following steps were initially developed by Eugene Gendlin as a way to teach Focusing. They are useful for learning the process of Focusing and accessing your inner wisdom. Over time, with practice, the steps become more organic as you gain experience “being with” the felt sense.

1. **Clearing a space:** taking an inventory of what is in the way of feeling “all fine.”
2. **Choosing an issue and felt sense:** picking one thing up that was set aside during the “Clearing A Space” and choosing it to work on. Get a felt sense.
3. **Symbol/Handle:** Word, phrase, image, gesture, or sound
4. **Resonate:** go back and forth between the bodily felt sense and the symbol/handle checking it for a sense of rightness...does it match?
5. **Ask:** Questions are posed to the felt sense:
 - What makes it so _____(fill in felt sense)?
 - Or, what’s the crux of it?
 - Imagine this issue is all resolved...imagine what it would look like or feel like in your body...
 - What’s in the way?
 - What’s needed?
 - What’s a good small, step in the right direction?
6. **Receive:** listen to the inner felt sense and what it says or offers... welcome what comes.

Notes:

a). Clearing a Space was originally designed as the first step of Focusing. Later, it was found through research and experience, that “Clearing a Space” can be done as a practice on its own—and that it has many stress reducing and other benefits (described later).

b). Focusing also does not need to be done with Clearing a Space. You can also just start with what you’d like to Focusing on. (You will learn more about this in the training).

c. **Establishing Safety with Focusing:** It is important to assess whether it is safe for clients/students to close their eyes during Focusing. To Focus, it is not necessary to have the eyes closed. Preliminary exercises for establishing safety with Focusing include:

Grounding exercises, such as awareness of feeling the feet on the floor, sitting on a chair, etc.

- awareness of senses: what I see around me; what I hear around me, etc.
- body awareness exercises—hands, arms, feet, legs, head, etc.
- moving, stretching various body parts
- breath awareness—coming in and out of the body; focus points, e.g. the abdomen rising and falling, the air at the nostrils

II. What is Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts?

Focusing-oriented expressive arts (FOAT®) is a mindfulness-based method that integrates Eugene Gendlin’s Focusing with the expressive arts. It was developed by Dr. Laury Rappaport over a period of 30 years in various contexts—psychotherapy, art/expressive arts therapy, education, coaching, consulting, organizational and community development, health and wellness, meditation, spirituality, creativity, and personal growth.

What are the benefits of FOAT®? FOAT® increases mindful awareness, cultivates self-compassion and compassion toward others, provides access to our inherent wisdom and enhances creativity. FOAT provides tools for centering and mind-body-spirit integration, reducing stress, enhancing wellbeing and strengths, working through difficulties/challenges, and assisting with decision-making. It is a self-empowering method as it teaches how to access and trust your own inner knowing—and to hear concrete steps that lead you to where you are wanting to get to.

Foundational Principles of FOAT®

1. **Safety comes first**—before any interventions.
2. **Presence:** awareness of your own state (therapist). Are you willing to be here, to be present, to meet, and welcome “the person in there?” Can you be mindful of your own issues? Can you be “friendly” to your own self?
3. **Clinical Sensitivity:** adapt FOAT (eyes open, closed, etc.) and to the specific needs of each population and client.
4. **Grounding:** e.g. body awareness; mindful breathing; safety phrases
5. **Empathic Reflection:** listening; artistic; and movement mirroring
6. **The Focusing Attitude**—being friendly, welcoming to the inner felt sense (experience) and art making process/product.

What are the main approaches of FOAT®?

1. **Basic FOAT Step: Expressive Arts**—Express felt sense symbol/handle into expressive arts
FOAT begins with bringing mindful awareness into the body with an attitude of gentle curiosity and “friendliness” toward the inner experience. As we keep attention on the bodily *felt sense*, often a word, phrase, image, gesture or sound comes that matches the felt sense. In Focusing, this is called the symbol or “handle” (see Gendlin, 1981, *Focusing*). The handle or symbol naturally unfolds into creative expression. For example,

- A word or phrase easily becomes a poem or writing
- An image becomes the source for visual art expression
- A gesture unfolds into creative movement or dance
- And a sound becomes music or a sound exploration

2. **Clearing a Space with the Expressive Arts:** Clearing a Space with the Expressive Arts (CAS-A) is a beneficial method of stress reduction and helping you to find the place within that is “All Fine.” It is based on Eugene Gendlin’s (1981) step of Focusing, Clearing a Space— where you imagine placing “issues” that are in the way of feeling “All Fine” at a distance outside of your body.

Once “placed,” you then sense the place inside that is separate from those things. I call this the “All Fine Place.” During CAS-A, the expressive arts are used to place the issues and also represent the “All Fine Place.” Most often people feel lighter, clearer, with a renewed sense of wellbeing. This is an exercise that can be practiced daily for stress reduction, centering, and as a prelude to creative work or meditation, or addressing any of the issues set aside.

3. Theme Directed FOAT: In Theme-Directed FOAT, a topic is selected to focus on to address an individual or group’s needs. For example, to enhance strengths, the topic may be about your resources; support system; or gratitude. Topics may also be about issues that need addressing, such as fear, love, or anger.

4. FOAT Working on an Issue: In “Working on an issue”, the Focuser chooses an issue to address— and Focusing, compassionate listening and the expressive arts are interspersed in a moment-to-moment unfolding of the Focuser’s experiential process. It follows what Gendlin names a “zig-zag” process, alternating among listening, Focusing and expressive arts—staying carefully attuned to the Focuser’s process. Over time, Focuser’s (clients) become more self-compassionate, find embodied solutions, work through blocks and unresolved issues, and access their inner wisdom and creativity.

FOCUSING AND EXPERIENTIAL LISTENING COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER

During the Focusing and expressive arts processes, experiential listening supports the unfolding of the process and conveys compassionate presence and understanding (see Listening Handout).

Compassionate listening is interspersed in the Focusing process. This helps the Focuser feel your presence and empathic understanding, and it helps the Focuser’s process to naturally unfold.

III. Expressive Arts

The expressive arts therapies include the single modalities of art therapy, dance-movement therapy, music therapy, drama therapy, and poetry therapy, as well as an integrated approach often referred to as expressive arts therapy or creative arts therapy. Play therapy and child life often integrate various expressive arts modalities into their approach.

Pioneers in Expressive Arts

- **Shaun McNiff:** started the first expressive arts graduate program in the world at Lesley University, Cambridge, MA; total expression; art as medicine
- **Paolo Knill:** intermodal expressive arts
- **Natalie Rogers:** the creative connection ®

Each expressive arts modality offers something unique to its art form:

- *Art:* uses lines, shapes, colors and materials to express feelings, thoughts, and more.
- *Dance-movement:* uses the body, movement, gesture and dance to express feelings, thoughts and more.
- *Music:* uses both music listening and music-making to express feelings, thoughts and more.
- *Poetry and creative writing:* uses words and other inspirations to create poems and writing. Others’ poetry can be used to express particular feelings and/or serve as a stimulus for further writing.
- *Drama therapy:* integrates action methods, improvisation and drama to express various feelings, thoughts and more. Psychodrama is a specialized form within

drama therapy.

- *Intermodal or integrated expressive arts therapy*: incorporates more than one arts modality and interweaves them together.

The expressive arts therapies help to:

- Provide relaxation and calm
- Express challenging and hopeful feelings (and everything in-between)
- Communicate with self and others
- Access an inner reservoir of resource and resilience

Focusing and Expressive Arts Resources

Websites for Training and Information

Focusing and Expressive Arts Institute (FOAT®): www.focusingarts.com
Laury Rappaport, Ph.D., MFT, ATR--BC, REAT; Email: laury@focusingarts.com

The International Focusing Institute (TIFI): www.focusing.org

FOAT® Institute Books and Chapters: <https://www.focusingarts.com/articles-and-chapters>

TIFI website list for FOAT® : https://www.focusing.org/arts_therapy.html

Books and Chapters on FOAT®: <https://www.focusingarts.com/articles-and-chapters>

Rappaport, L. (2013). *Mindfulness and the Arts Therapies: Theory and Practice (Ed.)*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Rappaport, L. (2016). Enhancing imagery with Focusing-oriented expressive arts. In L. Davenport, *Transformative imagery: Cultivating the imagination for healing, growth and change*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Rappaport, L. (2015). Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy and Mindfulness with Children and Adolescents Experiencing Trauma. In C. Malchiodi, *Creative interventions for traumatized children*, 2nd edition. NY: Guilford Press.

Rappaport, L. (2014). Focusing-oriented expressive art therapies: Working on the avenues. In G. Madison (Ed.). *Focusing-oriented psychotherapy: Beyond the Talking Cure*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Rappaport, L. (2014). Integrating Focusing with the Expressive Arts Therapies and Mindfulness. *The Folio: A Journal for Focusing and Experiential Therapy* 25, 1, 152-161.

Rappaport, L. (2013). Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapy: Cultivating Mindfulness and Compassion, and Accessing Inner Wisdom. In L. Rappaport (Ed.). *Mindfulness and the Arts Therapies: Theory and Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Weiner, E. & Rappaport, L. (2013). Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapy and Mindfulness with Children and Adolescents. In L. Rappaport (Ed.). *Mindfulness and the Arts Therapies: Theory and Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

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. (2013). Trusting the felt sense in art-based research. In S. McNiff, (Ed.) *Art as research: opportunities and challenges*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Publishers.

Rappaport, L. (2011). History and Development Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy and Experiential Collage Work in Japan in *Art Therapy in Asia*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, In Press.

Rappaport, L. (2010). "Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy: Working with Trauma" in *The Journal for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy*.

(2009). *Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy: Accessing the Body's Wisdom and Creative Intelligence*, Jessica Kingsley, 2009 (also published in Japanese by Sheisin Shobo Publishers; and in Korean, 2012).

Rappaport, L. (2008). Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy. *The Folio: A Journal for Focusing and Experiential Therapy*, 21, 1, 139-155.

(2006). "Focusing and Expressive Arts Therapy as a Complementary Treatment for Women with Breast Cancer," co-authored with Klagsbrun, Rappaport, Marcow-Speiser, Byers, Post, Stepakoff, and Karman, *Journal of Creativity and Mental Health*, Vol. 1.

Rappaport, L. (1998). "Focusing and Art Therapy: Tools for Healing from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" in *The Folio: Journal for Focusing and Experiential Therapy*.

Rappaport, L. (1992). "Focusing, Art, and Creative Movement: A Method for Stress Management." *Focusing Connection*.

Rappaport, L. (1988). "Focusing and Art Therapy," in the *Focusing Connection*.
(Rappaport, L. 1985). "Focusing and Body-Work" in the *Focusing Connection*. Co-authored with Neil

Friedman.

Rappaport, L. (1980). "Integrating Expressive Therapies Into A Day Treatment Setting." *Proceedings of*

American Association of Partial-Hospitalization, 1980. Co-authored with Shelley Cushner. Rappaport, L. "A Group Developmental Approach To Art Therapy," unpublished manuscript.

Dissertations, Theses and Grants (available through website:
<https://www.focusingarts.com/research>)

Dissertations

Chidanand, R. (2014). A Quantitative Study Exploring the Effects of Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapy - Internet Protocol (FOAT-IP) on stress, anxiety, depression, and positive states of mind in South Asian women.

Theses

Castalia, A. (2010). The Effect and Experience of Clearing a Space with Art on Stress Reduction in Sign Language Interpreters.

Cooney, A. (2012). An Investigation of the Role of the Felt Sense in Art Therapy.

Findley, E. (2013). Focusing-Oriented Interventions to Reduce Suicidality in Caucasian Middle-Aged- Men: A Program Design. Unpublished thesis: Philips Graduate Institute.

Lee, H. (2011). Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy and Bookmaking to Promote Resiliency of Children Living in a Homeless Shelter.

McGrath, J. (2013). The Effects of Clearing a Space with Art on Women with Chronic Pain.

Weiland, L. (2012). Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy as a Means of Stress Reduction with Graduate Students

Grants

Colle, S. (2013). Using Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy to Form Secure Attachments

Larivière, Marise (2011). Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy in Multiple Sclerosis: A Randomized Control Study to Enhance Quality of Life

Weiner, E. (2012). A Mindful Art Program: Using Mindfulness and Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy with Children and Adolescents to Decrease Stress and Increase Self-Compassion

CD: Focusing for Wellbeing: Guided Exercises by Laury Rappaport (includes Focusing exercises and 3 mindfulness exercises). Available at: www.focusingarts.com

DVD: Integrating Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy into Clinical Practice—85 minutes –includes overview of 3 main FOAT approaches; FOAT with trauma; demonstration of Focusing, listening, art, and Gestalt processing.

Video:

Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapies (FOAT®): An Introduction: video recording by Nada Lou. Digital streaming through Expressive Media: <https://www.expressivemedia.org/product-category/single-titles/>

Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapies (FOAT®): Client Demonstration Focusing, Art and Action Methods. Digital streaming through Expressive Media: <https://www.expressivemedia.org/product-category/single-titles/>

Focusing and Expressive Arts: Tools for Self-Compassion, Emotion Regulation and Accessing the Body's Wisdom (parts 1 + 2). Presented at ReCamft February 5, 2016. <https://www.focusingarts.com/videos>