

Focusing with Art and Creative Movement: A Method for Stress Management

By Laury Rappaport in The Focusing Connection, Vol.X, No.2, March 1993.

Focusing can be combined with art and creative movement to provide a powerful, concrete process for stress management. I used this method at a psychiatric day treatment center with adults, most of whom were diagnosed with bipolar, schizophrenic, and borderline personality disorder. The method is applicable to healthier populations as well, although with a healthier population I would add the steps of asking into the felt sense and receiving. It's especially beneficial for the more disturbed clients who are and need to be concrete. First I describe the method, followed by a case example and discussion. We begin with clients sitting in a circle, on chairs or on mats.

1. **Focusing.** I guide the group by saying, "Breathe. Let your attention come down inside to your body Notice whatever is happening inside ... Be friendly to whatever you find See if there is a word, phrase, image, gesture, or sound that matches or acts like a handle for the inner felt sense Check it, say it back to yourself, see if it's right. ... If it's not right, let it go and let a new word, phrase, image, gesture, or sound come,"

2. **Identify bodily tension.** I continue, "Take another deep breath. Now, let your attention come down inside your body and notice whether there are any places of tension If you find any, greet them in a friendly way Hang out with it. ... "See if there's an image that matches the inner felt sense of tension. If no image comes, and there is a word or phrase, that's OK too."

3. **Drawing the felt sense.** "Draw the image of the felt sense of the tension." Clients use magic markers, crayons, oil pastels, etc.

4. **Group sharing.** I ask that each person share her/his drawing and say aloud the place of tension in the body.

5. **Creative movement.** Drawings are put aside. I put on music (e.g. "We Are Family" by the Pointer Sisters, "You Can Get If You Really Want" by Jimmy Cliff, etc.) and lead a creative movement warm-up of the body parts. This includes loosening up and stretching the head, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, torso, abdomen, hips, leg, and feet.

Following the warm-up, I ask the clients to focus into their bodies, find the place of tension identified earlier, and to *breathe* into that place. "Breathe relaxing, healing breath into that place of tension. Hold the breath to the count of five, then release the breath." I repeat this 7-10 times, and then ask the clients to open their eyes and make eye contact with the group.

6. **Second drawing.** "Focus, once again, on the original place in the body where the tension was. Sense the whole feel of it now Be friendly See if there is an image that matches the whole felt sense Check it against your body to see if it's right. If it's not right, let it go and let a new image appear. Draw the image of the felt sense."

7. **Compare.** I ask the clients to compare the area of tension in the beginning of the session with the area of tension after the Focusing, art, and creative movement, and notice any change. I also ask them to compare the two drawings. The change between the first and second drawings is a visual reflection of the *felt shift*.

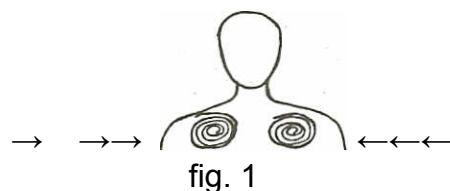
8. **Final sharing.** Each person in the group shares her/his experience and the two drawings.

Here is the story of how this process worked for Sarah, a 32-year-old woman attending a psychiatric day treatment program for severe depression.

Focusing. Sarah focuses and reports a heavy feeling in her abdomen. Her symbol for the felt sense is a ship out in the ocean alone, at night.

Identify bodily tension. Sarah lets her attention come down inside her body to notice places of tension. She is aware of tension in her shoulders, upper torso, and pressure from outside.

Drawing the felt sense. Sarah draws Figure 1.



The shapes inside the torso represent the blocked energy and tension. The arrows pointing inward symbolize the pressure Sarah experiences from the outside pushing in.

Creative movement. Sarah moves to the music "We Are Family" and follows the guided exercises for loosening the muscles for head, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, etc. Sarah takes breath into the tension in her shoulders and upper torso. She holds her breath holds it. holds it. ... and lets go. She does this 7-10 times.

6. **Second drawing.** Sarah focuses again into her body where she had identified the tension. She notices the tension has dissolved. Her shoulders and torso feel relaxed, warm, and the pressure from the outside has stopped. The energy flows through her body and she feels at ease with the environment. Sarah's second drawing is Figure 2.

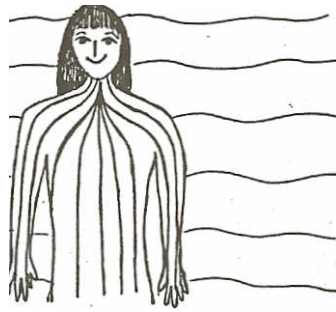


Fig.2

Compare. Following the creative movement, art, and Focusing, Sarah has experienced a felt shift from the bodily felt tension in her shoulders, upper torso, and pressure from the outside, to the dissolution of tension, relaxation in her shoulders and torso and experience of ease with the environment. The drawings visually reflect the felt shift: the shapes representing the blocked energy and tension (Figure 1) change to flowing lines of energy (Figure 2). The arrows symbolizing the external pressure (Figure 1) change to relaxed lines expressing Sarah's ease with the environment. The appearance of facial features and hair (Figure 2) compared to the empty face in Figure 1, expresses Sarah's coming into more presence. The facial expression is one of wellbeing. The drawings clearly show the reduction of stress.

In a psychiatric day treatment center, with clients who suffer from confused, disoriented, and psychotic thought processes, the art and creative movement serve to help them stay focused in their bodies, to stay with and symbolize the felt sense, and to not get lost in their thinking.

I have found the felt shift dramatized by Sarah's drawings, to be representative of most clients using this method. The drawings go from a state of blocked tension to a greater flow of energy. Clients reported having fun, learning to relax, and feeling empowered to do something to relieve their stress, tension, and anxiety.