

## FINDING SANCTUARY IN A STRESSFUL ENVIRONMENT

### The Use of Clearing a Space to Enhance Learning for College and Graduate Students

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*The evils which we suffer in education... in the whole separation of knowledge and practice — all testify to the necessity of seeing mind-body as an integral whole.*

— John Dewey, American Educator

#### ABSTRACT

Clearing a Space, the first movement of Focusing, is an effective tool in preparing students to become more present and receptive for learning in class. It seems to function as a powerful stress-reduction measure. After taking an inventory of their current felt problems or stressors, which are gently placed aside, students are guided to find a cleared space or sanctuary within. This process allows them to find the way back to a positive sense of self, increase the capacity to be in the present, and set a clear intention for learning. This paper describes the origins and evolution of Clearing a Space; demonstrates the need for this practice, in and out of the classroom environment; and describes how it effectively reduces stress. The benefits of Clearing a Space are discussed, and a protocol for its practice is included.

#### ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF CLEARING A SPACE

*You do not know what life means when all the difficulties are removed!  
It is like eating sweet dessert the first thing in the morning.*

— Jane Addams, Pacifist, Feminist  
and Nobel prize winner

#### History

When Eugene Gendlin refined the Focusing method in the 1970s, he noticed that if practitioners initially engaged in sensing their bodies from the inside, named the current issues that were impinging on them, and imagined placing these issues at the right distance outside of the body, the Focusing process that followed was often deeper and more effective. He found this step of engaging with one's issues *while not becoming consumed by them*, an excellent prologue to Focusing. This new step was effective enough to be incorporated as one of the six movements of the Focusing method (Gendlin, 1981). Gendlin called this preliminary movement by several names: "putting things down", "making space" and finally "Clearing a Space"(Gendlin, 1979, 1982). Over time, he came to think that this preliminary

step was the most effective movement to teach first, in order to impart the essence of Focusing. In one article he said, "If it succeeds, it seems to me the subsequent Focusing is much better" (1979, p.1).

During the next decade many Focusing practitioners discovered that Clearing a Space appeared to also function as a freestanding and rapid stress management tool (McGuire,1984; McDonald, 1984; Fisch, 1984). These practitioners showed that when working with highly stressed or even suicidal individuals, helping them to experience a sense of a self, separate from their issues, facilitated a shift in their whole experience of the problem. (These sessions were all in the presence of, and with guidance from, a caring therapist.) Over time, many practitioners used Clearing a Space as a stand alone technique, including for individuals facing cancer (Grindler Katonah, 1982, 1999; Kantor 1999; Somerville 1999; Klagsbrun 1999, 2007 and Klagsbrun, Rappaport, Marcow -Speiser, Post, Byers, Stepakoff, and Karmann, 2006). Focusing directly on the "OK" or "all fine" place, rather than on the problem, appeared to provide a sense of hopefulness, spaciousness, and new life energy for clients with a cancer diagnosis. During this same time period, some educators were discovering the transformative possibilities of Clearing a Space in schools (McGuire,1996; Stapert,1997).

### *Clearing a Space in School*

One important early initiative was a project conducted by Mary McGuire (1986), in which Clearing a Space was taught to elementary school students. McGuire wanted to educate children to understand that they did not have to either avoid or feel overwhelmed by their problems. She hoped that by teaching the children to learn — early in life — how not to carry stress in their bodies, later developed stress-related illnesses such as ulcers, migraine headaches, and heart attacks might be prevented. Also, by learning to listen to and trust their inner knowing, McGuire believed that the children would gain a greater sense of self-control and a heightened awareness of their own resources in problem-solving, thereby reducing some of the negative influences of peer pressure. The children took to the Clearing a Space easily, imagining placing their problems under a mattress, in the freezer, or sending them on an airplane to Florida.

Marta Stapert (1997) has also been a central force in continuing to develop a Clearing a Space for elementary school-aged children. She created a teaching manual for Clearing a Space with children, worked in several countries, and trained practitioners worldwide through international conferences. Over 70 articles on Clearing a Space and Focusing with children in schools (<http://www.focusing.org/chfc/index.html>) demonstrate the widespread and successful use of this approach.

### *Improving School Performance*

Over the past three decades, there has also been quantitative research on Clearing a Space's effect on learning in school. In a review article, Parker (2003) summarizes evidence from a series of five studies using Clearing a Space (Zimring 1974,1983,1988, 1990.) This summary indicates that performance improved on complex mental tasks requiring attention to internally generated stimuli. It appears that Clearing a Space, which trains a person to

reflect inwardly, strengthens one's attention and focus. The ability to be present and available for learning is critical for all students. However, it is not just younger students who need help to reduce their stress levels before settling down to learn; a complex and daunting series of stressors beset college and graduate students, as well.

## **STRESS AND LEARNING**

Stress, defined here as any factor that places undue demands on the individual's ability to adapt, often has a deleterious effect on one's cognitive capacities. Intense and prolonged stress can produce cognitive impairments in the part of the brain that affects memory and spatial relations, as well as increasing the intensity and frequency of the fight or flight response (Parks 2003). High stress levels diminish one's capacity to absorb new information and to remember what has been learned. Learning and retaining information are key skills in higher education.

Both college and graduate students come to school under the burden of a large number of stressors and distractions. College students find themselves suddenly catapulted into a new and relatively unstructured environment. They must deal with separation from home and family, the vagaries of intimate relationships, in late adolescence or early adulthood, as well as issues of identity and purpose. A similar list of stressors applies to graduate students, often with the addition of the financial pressures of managing a household, long commuting times, the demands of a family, and working part or full-time to pay for their education.

Common to all students is the fact that the burden of their non-academic life is carried with them into the classroom. And, of course, academic life has its own set of stressors: exams, time management, extracurricular activities, social life, writing papers, etc. In a recent survey by the Associated Press of college students (Fram, 2008) confirms that the stress load of students is a significant factor in diminishing their ability to be intellectually and emotionally present in class.

One additional significant stressor on students is the shift in cultural stimulation. Most students come from a culture characterized by rapid doses of highly stimulating information. Witness modern television commercials, MTV, video or arcade games, and popular movies, and you will see an environment that is faster, more intense, of shorter duration, and, on the whole, more stimulating than the one you would find in the average college or graduate school classroom. The relatively low-stimulation environment of the classroom, plus high stress levels carried over from non-class experiences, are a direct impediment to a person's ability to pay attention to, and be receptive to, the learning offered in a classroom setting.

Unfortunately, there are few places where the difficulties of making the transition from "real life" to the classroom are recognized and dealt with effectively. In one study, middle-school inner-city teachers trained students in relaxation response exercises. The students who had two semesters of exposure to these relaxation exercises developed improved work habits and higher grade-point averages than the control group (Benson, 2000).

The brain is a plastic and highly adaptable medium. New findings in neuroscience demonstrate that the way we focus our attention determines which neural circuits are activated. Optimal learning requires brain adaptability, and stress reduction techniques that

improve adaptability both cognitively and emotionally (Siegel 2008). According to Siegel, inner reflection develops the prefrontal cortex, which influences our compassion and empathy for others, as well as for ourselves. He believes that such practices, which cultivate our social/ emotional competence, also promote academic success. Clearing a Space, with its emphasis on self-acceptance and inner reflection, provides just the kind of activity that Siegel believes will harness neural plasticity.

It seems evident that teachers could benefit from the implementation of stress-reduction methods to help students become more present and ready to be engaged in class. Even teachers who understand how to achieve a sense of presence when stressed themselves are rarely well-versed in helping their students achieve a state of receptivity at the beginning of a class. In my experience, and from the clinical experiences and research that my colleagues and I have completed (Grindler Katonah, 1999; Klagsbrun, 1999; Klagsbrun et al, 2006; Klagsbrun, 2007), Clearing a Space appears to be a unique and effective tool for rapid stress reduction. I propose that the Clearing a Space method should be an explicit part of any college or graduate school curriculum. The effective use of this brief practice would offer both teachers and students an opportunity to become more centered, calmer and more ready and able to engage with the material in class.

### **WHAT MAKES CLEARING A SPACE UNIQUE?**

Following are three explanations for how Clearing a Space reduces stress:

#### **It invites us to separate each distinct issue, thereby incrementally releasing bodily tension.**

We carry stressful situations in the body as physical tension that is often specific to each psychological issue—such as tightness in the stomach about one issue, shallow breathing and constriction about another, and tight shoulders about a third. However, we often feel the stress as one big, indiscriminate knot. When we try to turn our attention away from the problems, often the body retains its stress, tension, or agitation. For many individuals, placing the generalized feeling of agitation, malaise, or anger aside all at once while trying to concentrate on something else, often does not work well. However, with Clearing a Space, we attend to how the body is carrying *each* stressor or problem, and then, strand by strand, mentally place “all about *that one*” aside. This specificity allows us to relax the particular bodily tightness or constriction attached to each issue. This method of *incremental relaxation*, removing issue by issue, can be beneficial — especially for those who cannot achieve a relaxation response in other ways. Even for those who are able to globally put aside their stressors, identifying and tagging each issue, sensing how you are without it, and finding the right distance from it, can be very therapeutic.

#### **It teaches us to name and relate to each issue without trying to solve it.**

The Clearing a Space method invites the student to actively take an inventory of what is *in the way* of feeling present and ready for class, and to then discover how it would be if

all of those impediments to feeling present were removed. Whether feeling anxious, fearful, angry, scattered, fatigued, preoccupied or distracted, taking some time to identify what is “between me and feeling fine” or “what is between me and being ready to be in class”, helps change the student’s relationship to their problems (which usually are the current obstacles to well-being and effective learning). This process teaches the person to notice what the body is carrying, without having to work on or solve the problem right away. Instead of getting overwhelmed or avoiding the issue, the person experiences a new way of relating to the issues. This paradigm shift often brings physical and psychological relief, new energy, and a fresh perspective on the problems.

**It welcomes us to be in the ‘clear’ or ‘all fine’ space so we have a few moments in a stress-free zone.**

Clearing a Space uniquely involves explicitly naming and setting aside each person’s current stressors. While these stressors might be named aloud to a partner, the inventory can also be taken as a silent and private guided exercise. By identifying and articulating all the issues that comprise our stress load, and metaphorically placing the identified stressors “at a safe distance”, the student gains some a sense of control over that stressor. More importantly, the student gets to experience what it *would feel like on a bodily level if all those impediments to feeling good were removed*. The student is being asked, in an indirect way, to summon up his or her optimal internal state of being ‘all fine.’ Interestingly, this cleared space is usually more than a neutral space of merely being all right; it often seems to open the Focuser into a broader spiritual experience. Many students report feeling calm, spacious, at peace, and in harmony with themselves; some report feeling a sense of unity and spirituality.

## **WHY CLEARING A SPACE IS EFFECTIVE**

For such a brief practice (approximately ten to fifteen minutes), Clearing a Space can be surprisingly effective. Why is it that this practice can achieve such a rapid shift of perspective, energy and mood? Some possible explanations are that Clearing a Space:

**1. Creates a “frame” which has as its basic assumption the idea that feeling “OK” is our natural state:**

The concept that our lives have presented us with a number of obstacles that currently block our ability to “feel OK”, and that we have tools to remove these blocks, is essentially optimistic and empowering. The “frame” implies that we are basically OK, and that we now have the resources to move back toward that state.

**2. Shows us how to have a relationship with our “issues”:**

We attempt to treat ourselves with an **attitude of compassion, self-acceptance and friendliness**. This is not a forced acceptance of what feels unacceptable—it is simply a

“friendly” acknowledgement of whatever is there. It is as if we are saying “hello” to our issues and making a space for them, giving them credibility, but at the same time denying them any dictatorial power. This model for a compassionate relationship with difficult issues can be a potent form of stress reduction. While critical and judgmental attitudes close off lines of communication and increase stress levels, a welcoming attitude allows us to hear from parts of ourselves that have been previously inaccessible and brings some softening and stress relief.

**3. Gives a name to whatever we are sensing inside** that was previously unnamable but which has been a source of stress, tension, or anxiety.

This “thing” sensed inside (the ‘felt sense’) might be named as a recognizable issue such as *frustration with my boss* about not giving me a raise, which I know is connected to a tight and contracted feeling in my chest; or it may be an unknown *something* that is unclear but distinctly felt in the body, such as *a knot of dread in the pit of my stomach that I don’t yet understand*. Either way, we are empowered to use Clearing a Space as a tool for identifying those sensations that are not yet symbolized through words. By recognizing and naming them, we begin the process of releasing their hold over us.

**4. Helps us to put each of these issues at the right distance away, *outside the body* — thus creating a sense of a larger self that is not constrained by our problems and limitations:**

Some people use imagery to place the issues away— such as wrapping them up like a package and placing them next to where one is sitting; or placing them in a boat and sending them out to sea, or finding a spot where each one belongs. One student reported giving her first issue to a close friend who held it lovingly, placing a second issue in a large see-through container by her side, and sending her third problem to Kansas, hundreds of miles away. This act of tailoring the image to the *right “packaging”* and setting it at *“the right distance”* allows each person to invent a personal method of managing the stress inherent in that issue that works best. It employs **the intelligence of the body/mind, which seems to know how and where each issue needs to be placed** so that one gets respite from it. In this process, each person learns how to achieve a state that is neither abandoning problems nor confronting them, but merely “parking” them at a comfortable distance in order to be present for the task at hand (i.e. being present in class). The message of this practice is that each of us has the capacity to hold our issues without becoming contaminated by them, and to accurately find what will bring our lives forward.

**5. Brings to light our *background* sense:**

In addition to the inventory that comes from the body’s experience of what it is carrying in the moment, we are asked to identify a *background* sense—that familiar quality that is like the wallpaper that we don’t even see any more — that is there, coloring our whole present-time life experience. A *background* sense is like an *always* feeling, such as *always* feeling driven, or *always* sad, or *always* pressured, unprepared, bored, disconnected, racing,

anxious or exhausted. The *background* sense might also be positive, such as *always* feeling excited, or eager, or content. By discovering this *background* sense, we get a more global perception of what is *between us and feeling fine*. Students often feel the greatest relief from realizing that there *is* a background sense, and then identifying and placing it at the right distance away.

#### **6. Gives us a glimpse of what it would be like to experience ourselves without our familiar concerns and weighty issues:**

As we take a minute or two to dwell in the cleared or clearer space, we feel more enabled to experience what it would be like to live without all those tangles that comprise our tension or heaviness, and compromise our sense of well being. This is an important moment and often a rare experience for many individuals. Without those burdens, most people report feeling lighter, less weighed down, and more how they are when they are at their best. They describe this feeling variously as feeling calm, or spacious, or finding a bigger perspective, or getting connected to their aliveness and energy.

While the process of Clearing a Space is relatively brief, it is quite unique. The aforementioned six explanations of why it is effective in reducing stress are not totally comprehensive; however, the points suggest some of the reasons that this method can efficiently shift energy, perspective, and transform mood.

### **CLEARING A SPACE IN CONJUNCTION WITH COLLEGE OR GRADUATE SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

There are two ways that Clearing a Space can be incorporated at the start of a class—teacher facilitated or peer partnerships:

**Teacher Facilitated:** The teacher begins the class by guiding the students through the CAS protocol. Students are invited to become aware of their breathing, to relax, to come into silence, to remember a time when they had a sense of peace or well being, and to identify, name and metaphorically set the issues weighing on them at the right distance outside their body. If students are in a positive place, they spend time noticing what has contributed to their feeling so good.

A constructive relationship between teacher and student often develops as teachers convey acceptance and permission through their tone of voice when guiding students in CAS. Students typically feel that their full selves are welcome in the class. The teacher is then *'experienced'* as validating students as they are, as well as offering something of value that assists students in making the transition from their busy lives into the classroom environment.

**Peer Partnerships:** The second way to incorporate Clearing a Space into class involves students finding a partner and taking turns reading each other the protocol. In this alternative model, students can choose to keep their issues silent or, if they feel safe and comfortable with their fellow student, they can say out loud what is in their way of being fully present for class that day.



Often, when a student shares with a fellow student, either by following the process in silence or aloud, a sense of trust often develops. Consequently, an intimacy and bond occurs that has many benefits, such as: reducing the sense of isolation which many students face; reducing stress by feeling that one's situation is held and validated by a peer, often increasing mood, and creating the possibility of new friendships. Having someone *hold the space* while doing this personal and inner reflection can also allow the student to go deeper into clearing out the difficulties, because the process taps into the power of human connection.

### **COMPARING CLEARING A SPACE TO MEDITATION AND OTHER CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES**

There are some similarities between Clearing a Space and other contemplative practices such as the relaxation response, meditation, and yoga. All four methods lead to a calming of the sympathetic nervous system, and all involve turning inward and using silence as part of their practice. However, there are some interesting differences between Clearing a Space and the contemplative methods.

First, instead of giving only bare attention to the stressor, as one does in meditation, in Clearing A Space one directs one's attention fully to a concern or difficulty, and then observes how the body is carrying that issue. Second, in Clearing A Space one attends to the *felt sense* level of experience — that vague, elusive preverbal sense of *something* that you can distinctly feel in the body. Meditation sees images, thoughts and emotions as quite separate phenomena (Grindler Katonah, 2006).

Third, imagery usually does not play a significant role in meditation. It is, however, an integral element of Clearing A Space. It can be creatively employed by the student as a unique way to place each stressful concern outside the body.

Finally, Clearing A Space also has a relational dimension. This contrasts with relaxation and meditation, which are generally used as solo practices. Whether it is the teacher-student relationship that is improved (through the teacher's voice getting connected to the reduction in stress), or whether it is contact with another student (creating a sense of intimacy and connectedness), there is a communal benefit that comes from the relational aspect of this process. The class becomes engaged in a unified way, and shares a common practice. Moreover, the relational aspect also speaks to a special aspect of Clearing a Space in which one develops a relationship with one's issues—saying “hello” to them and trying to bring a respectful friendliness towards them. In return for this gentle acknowledgement, the issues are often more willing to be temporarily placed out of the body, offering some needed respite from them.

### **STUDENTS' RESPONSE TO THE CLEARING A SPACE PRACTICE**

Students deeply appreciate the 10-15 minutes to collect and center themselves, and are much more present. Any concern about the “lost time” of teaching is made up by the



students' increase in attentiveness and engagement with the class material. One informal measure I have for the effectiveness of this tool of Clearing a Space is how punctual students are. I have asked students who arrive late, to please wait outside the classroom until the Clearing a Space time is complete, so as not to disturb the others. Rarely does anyone arrive late! And, if by chance I forget to start class with this practice, students remind me to stop and help them to Clear a Space. In my evaluations from over 30 years of teaching, students have repeatedly mentioned how helpful Clearing a Space has been. They report that it helps them with their transition to school from wherever they were before, or as they change from one class to another. Students then realize that getting themselves physically to class doesn't assure that they are truly present. Many have also reported that over time, Clearing a Space becomes a practice that they can use outside of class as well, whenever they feel overwhelmed or weighed down. They are able to generalize its use to any stress-laden situation.

## CONCLUSION

Clearing a Space provides many advantages to teachers and students.

It is a harmonizing practice that connects mind/body and spirit — a process that is physical (works with the body), mental (works with attention, intention, and meaning), and spiritual (creates a broader perspective). It is a very effective way of preparing students for a new learning experience by encouraging them to become more present to themselves, more

### Protocol for Guiding Students Through Clearing a Space

The following are instructions for either the teacher or the students to read. If the peer method is being used, instead of pausing for the prescribed amount of time, the partners can give each other a signal, such as lifting a finger, to indicate that they are ready for the next instruction.

1. When you are ready, you might allow your eyes to close (or you can keep them open if you prefer), and begin to get comfortable in your chair. You might let yourself take a few slow, deep breaths, and then allow your attention to gently rest in the center of your body. (PAUSE)
2. Let's begin by remembering a time or place in which you felt a sense of well being, or peacefulness (and if you can't remember such a time, you might just imagine one). (PAUSE)

Allow yourself to get there with all your senses — what does it smell like, what do you see? What does it feel like to be you, with this sense of well being? (PAUSE)

3. Now, see if there is anything between you right now and that sense of well-being that you recalled. Ask yourself, "What's in the way of feeling fine?" (PAUSE) Don't answer, but let what comes in your body do the answering. Wait for a felt

- sense of one concern to form. (10 second PAUSE) If no concerns are present, you might keep your attention on the sense of peace or well-being.
4. If there is something in the way of feeling perfectly fine, see if there is a word, a phrase, or an image that captures the quality of how the concern feels in your body. (5 second PAUSE) Say the word, phrase, or image back to yourself, and check to see if it fits the sense you have there exactly.
  5. Now give this concern your accepting, friendly attention for a few moments, so that you can acknowledge that it's really there (5 second PAUSE). Then, put it aside for a while by imagining that you are placing it outside of your body, in a safe place. Sometimes it helps to imagine that you're sitting on a park bench, and each concern can be wrapped up like a package, and placed on the park bench next to you—or at whatever distance away would feel right. It sometimes helps to take a big exhalation to breathe it out. (10 second PAUSE)
  6. As you bring your attention back into your body, notice if you now feel a little lighter or clearer inside without that one. (PAUSE)
  7. Now again, bring your attention inside and ask, "Except for that, am I feeling fine?" (5 seconds). Wait and see if something else wants your attention next.
  8. If something else comes up, wait for a felt sense of that concern to form (PAUSE), and see if a word, phrase, or image captures the quality of how this concern feels in your body. (PAUSE) And then, after spending a little time with it, place it outside your body in a safe place as well. (10 second PAUSE) Notice if you feel a little lighter or clearer inside without that one. (PAUSE)
  9. (If the person seems to have another concern that is in the way of feeling fine, repeat steps 7 and 8 again before continuing. Check to see if they have cleared their concerns). Now, in addition to those issues and concerns you have placed aside, most of us have a *background* sense — always feeling a little anxious, or sad, or harried, or tense — see if you can find a background sense that's there for you today. Now, see if you can wrap that one up and place that out as well, breathing it out. (10 seconds)
  10. Finally, bring your attention back inside your body and see if you find that there is a clearer space there. (10 seconds) Welcome this space and allow yourself to rest in it. (10 second PAUSE). This is a time to remember that you are not your problems, even though you have them... you are much larger. (10 second PAUSE). Now see if a word, phrase, image or gesture captures how it feels in the "clearer space". (10 seconds). Say this word or phrase back to yourself and see if it is a good 'fit'. You might want to spend a little time with it, just as it comes there for you. (PAUSE 10 seconds)
  11. When you are ready, please turn your attention to the class that is about to begin. (PAUSE 5 seconds). See if you can find an intention for yourself in relation to this class — perhaps something you want to either learn or share, or a question

you may have. When you are ready, slowly and gently bring yourself back into the room. You might want to stretch as you are coming back. (PAUSE). If it feels right, you might want to look around the room and make some eye contact with others, to make sure you are fully back.

centered, and more clear about their intention for coming to class. Whether done as a whole class, or in pairs, Clearing a Space often brings both physiological and psychological relief. We come to realize that while we often have issues that are weighing on us, we can tag them and place them aside. In observing the issues or stressors from a safe distance, we become aware that we are not our problems. When we enter the ‘cleared space’, we can experience that essential part of ourselves that is separate from our problems, and uncontaminated by them. This fresh connection to an unburdened, larger self typically creates a sense of inner calm or peace.

With practice, over time, Clearing a Space becomes a stress reduction skill that is transferable to a variety of other circumstances the student may face outside of the classroom. In addition to increasing their presence in the classroom, students report utilizing this method for stress reduction when preparing to study, write a paper, give a presentation, or deal with personal problems. It truly becomes a sanctuary—a respite, a place to be still, to recharge, and to remember *who* they really are.

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