

HEALING WITH EXPRESSIVE ARTS

"The process of healing the mind and body brings about a transformation of the spirit. A transformation of the spirit occurs when the soul is released from the limiting and destructive patterns of the past to embrace the unlimited potential of the future. The spirit is the beacon of light within us, the light of divine connection that guides the mind and body through its journey in life. All too often we become separated from our spirit, unable to hear its call through our inner voice, a call that directs us to our path in life, our purpose or job on earth."

*Barbara Ganim, Director, Expressive Arts Institute
From Art and Healing*

Introduction

If you are looking to do inner work for more deep-seated, emotional issues or conditions in your life, such as depression, anxiety, grief, or other critical stress-related situations, expressive arts can be a useful method to explore.

Expressive arts uses various integrated modalities as tools for healing, including drawing, writing, and guided visualization. The following is an example of a self-healing tool I have used with myself, and with other individuals and groups in the community. It is intended to help you identify and express your feelings about a stressful issue; then tap into your inner wisdom to see a better way of responding to your stress. It allows you to go directly to the root of your feelings to diagnose your problem and to then tap into the transformational spirit of your inner voice for guidance.

How do images help us access our feelings? Split brain research shows that the right, intuitive side of the brain processes and stores our experiences and emotions first as images. Thus imagery is the language of emotions and the most direct representation of what we are truly feeling. Our drawings of those images are the expression of that language. When we focus our attention on the body, which houses our emotions, and access the images that represent them, we bypass the judgments of the thinking mind and directly contact what we are experiencing emotionally. While using words and talking about our feelings can shed light on them, our thoughts about our feelings are not always accurate. Our thinking mind, through its judgments, often clouds the truth of what we are really feeling. The body, however, never lies. Its language of imagery describes our feelings as they truly are.

It is also through the intuitive side of the brain that we are able to access the language of the spirit, which often provides information that cannot be attained through the reasoning, thinking mind alone. We gain entry into a deeper wisdom which we all possess but often ignore or are not connected with.

In the ensuing exercises, you first access an image of your stressful feelings, and secondly access a re-envisioned image of that stressful feeling. Every emotion generates a corresponding inner image. When you alter the image, you alter the response. Thus when you re-envision an image of a stress-producing emotion as a transformed image that represents a more constructive and positive response, your new image represents an emotional transformation. It may also convey a

message from your soul—a message that can help you understand the lesson behind the stressful situation.

Preparation

Allow up to an hour to do this exercise the first time, though it may take much less time after you've tried it once. Before beginning, create a quiet, calm space by putting on some relaxing instrumental music. You'll need a couple of blank sheets of paper, a pencil and pen, and some magic markers or crayons. Alternatively, you can use a journal with blank pages, particularly if you plan to do this more often.

The two sheets of paper go with two parts of this exercise:

- On the first sheet, you'll explore your feelings about a stressful issue.
- On the second sheet, you'll explore a new, more positive way to see the same issue.

Each of the two parts includes a visualization, drawing of images, and dialogue questions.

Remember that the drawing may be as simple as lines or colors. This is not about art but about expressing feelings. What's important is what the images mean to you. Only you can interpret them.

PART 1. Exploring a Stressful Issue

Focus on Your Intention

Focus on a current or recent stressful situation in your life that you want to explore. It could be related to work, a relationship, health, internal conflict, or any other source of stress, major or minor. Take a minute to think about the issue you'd like to work with, then write it down on the page or in your journal....just a word or short phrase to identify it.

Now take a minute to relax and get in touch with whatever you've chosen to focus on. The next section will take you through a brief guided visualization to help you see how you're responding to the issue; that is, what it feels like in your body and actually looks like. You can have someone read the visualization to you, or you can record it, until you're familiar enough to guide yourself through it. The same applies to the visualization in Part 2. Make sure the reading of the visualization is slow enough to allow time to relax and focus.

Guided Visualization

Sit comfortably in your chair. Rest your feet on the floor, hands on your lap.

Let go of distractions and come into the present moment.
Now close your eyes, and take a big, deep breath
And another deep breath, letting go of any tension.
Relax your body and focus on your breathing as you inhale and exhale.
Now draw your attention into your body.
Focus on what you wrote down: the situation causing you stress.

As you focus on that stressful feeling, imagine what it looks like.
What image or images come up? Trust whatever pops into your mind as being OK.
Do you imagine a shape, a few lines, or some image in motion?
Does the stress have a color? Several colors?
Is there a face to it? An object? A place?
Whatever appears, don't think about it; just let it be.

When you have something in mind, open your eyes, pick a color or colors from the markers, and transfer any image onto your paper or journal.
Don't judge what you do. Just let it be.

Drawing

Now take a few minutes to develop your image.

[NOTE: If you have trouble getting started, try using your left or non-dominant hand or just doodle.]
As you focus on feelings, what color(s) are you drawn to?
Pick up those colors and let your hand spontaneously express what you feel (e.g., angry, jagged red line)
As you draw, you will see forms emerge. Those forms may suggest more colors and shapes.
The drawing is an expression of your feelings.

Take whatever time you need to complete your drawing. Try to stay centered in your body and feelings, and keep developing the drawing until you've reached a stopping point.

Dialogue Questions

Following are a few questions to ask yourself about what you drew.
Look at the image you've put on the page and write down a few words in response to these questions: (you can write around the drawing or on the back side)

1. What feelings come up when you look at the whole image?
2. Do the colors you used have any meaning?
3. What lines and shapes do you see? What do they mean to you?
4. Do they remind you of anything? Do they hold any messages for you?
5. If the whole image had a voice and could speak, what would it say about your stress?
6. If you were to give a title to this drawing, what would it be? (Place this on the page.)

PART 2. Transforming Your Response to the Stressful Issue

Now that you've seen and thought about your response to a stressful issue, you're ready to access your inner wisdom to find a new response. Over time, this process will help you release the old response, and shift to a new one.

Guided Visualization

Again, sit comfortably.

Close your eyes.

Take a few deep breaths.

Relax your body.

Now draw your attention back to your body and the area of stress.

Remember what you put on the page in the first exercise. See it clearly in your memory.

Now imagine your own intuitive wisdom as your guide, as greater than your stress, greater than your issue. Imagine a power greater than yourself, a source of healing and wisdom, whatever form that may take for you, and let it guide you. Take a moment to connect with that inner guide.

Being open to this source, ask: Can I take the old image of my stress and sense any new way to see it? How would I like things to be? Take your time. Remain open, and trust that whatever new image comes into your mind as OK.

What is the new shape, new line, new figure or new place?

Are there new colors?

Let the new image take shape in your mind, and when you are ready, open your eyes.

Drawing

Now, place your new image on the second sheet of paper or on a new page in your journal. You might reach for a comforting color and then let your hand and eyes focus on the page to begin. Take as long as you need to develop your image.

Dialogue Questions

Now put the two sheets of paper side by side (or look at the two drawings in your journal) and write down a word or two in response to the following questions:

1. What differences do you see between the two drawings ?
2. Do the shapes in the second drawing have any message for you?
3. What do the colors in the second drawing mean to you?
4. If the second drawing could speak, what would it offer as a new way to see and respond to your stress?
5. Did the image suggest any changes you need to make? If so, what are they? Changes to your situation, changes to the way you look at it, or the way you look at yourself?
6. What title might you give to this drawing? (Place on page.)

Take whatever time you need to explore any messages you receive from the drawings. Don't worry if you don't get immediate answers. It is recommended that you put the drawings up some place where you can look at them and stay open to new messages that may come up. Often time will reveal new insights. When you receive them, jot them down.

If you are in therapy, these images can sometimes be a useful basis for discussion.

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