

EXPLORING SPACE IN PRESENCE WITH CREATIVE ARTS

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This article provides a practical exercise for Therapeutic Creative Arts practitioners on how to own one's being-in-the-world. It is a radically shortened version of my chapter 'Saying no in presence: Setting limits through body sense', originally published in Senses of Focusing vol. II (Kypriotakis and Moore, 2021, pp. 469-483). The theoretical framework for this exercise can be found in the original chapter.

I suggest Therapeutic Creative Arts practitioners to experiment with the exercise before adapting it as tool for their clients. The exercise contains a two-step-process originally designed by Dutch psychotherapist and Focusing pioneer René Maas who did not use arts (Maas, 2002, pp. 5–6). The process is presented in precise instructions and offers artistic expression referring to the mindfulness-based approach of Focusing Oriented Expressive Arts FOAT® by Laury Rappaport (Rappaport, 2009, 2023).

Therapeutic Creative Arts practitioners can read the exercise experientially to fellow colleagues for mutual experimenting (reading aloud slowly, pausing after each phrase or sentence), discuss the exercise, alter it and adapt it to their own practice.

When working with the exercise or parts of it, please cite the exercise coming from Expressive Arts Focusing ExAF (<https://www.expressiveartsfocusing.com>), ©Freda Blob, GER) with reference to René Maas, NL.

The exercise helps to install a state of self-in-presence (Weiser Cornell, 2013, p. xxxiii), meaning being not too close and not too far away from one's own feelings and emotions or relational issues. In practice, the state of self-in-presence needs a body sense to be perceived. The body sense is a directly felt experiencing or kinaesthetic sense of all kinds of situational experiences, accessible through feeling the body from within (Gendlin 2004, 2; Gendlin 1964, 8ff). The body sense (or Felt Sense) is actualising itself all the time but becomes accessible only through mindful

perception, that is by slowing down, pausing, sensing into 'gut feelings' and staying with what shows up.

In addition to the benevolently accepting attitude of the Person Centred Approach, the two-step-process of self-in-presence is about:

- letting oneself 'take up space' in one's own physically grounded presence, and
- letting oneself 'create space' in a formative presence.

'Taking up space' is becoming aware of one's own existence. It affirms a state of being and is the prerequisite for being able to perceive the right to one's own primal being. 'Creating space' is an orderly way of dealing with one's own existence and an active, directed action (Maas, 2004, p. 7; Maas, 2002, p. 6). The formative character of this second kind involves setting oneself free from introjected but already internalized representations. Methodologically, both steps are referred to as 'creating free space' or 'Clearing a Space CAS'.

The tool 'Clearing a Space CAS' has been invented by Prof. Eugene Gendlin, founder of Focusing (Gendlin, 2012, pp. 93–125), the experiential branch of the Person Centred Approach. In my opinion, the exercise 'Clearing a Space' as René Maas has put it (adding another step to Gendlin's original tool) is particularly convincing.

René Maas' therapy style is metaphoric, intermodal and suitable to Creative Arts. For him, generating a state of self-in-presence takes place through spatial whole-body sensing that allows to experience directly and beyond doubt that one's living space and outer demarcations belong together. According to René Maas, coming to presence and finding out about one's own demarcation is fundamental to carry the therapeutic process forward (Maas, 2002, 2004).

Exercise: Creating space and demarcation line with the arts

Where am I here? My own spatial location.

Find a comfortable way to sit. Take a few breaths into your body. Notice the breath as it comes in and moves out of your body. If you want to stand instead of sitting, feel free to do so. Let yourself notice your breathing. Check the location where you put your seat or chose to stand. Ask yourself: 'Is there enough space around?' Your space around has a front side, left and right, and a back side.

I invite you to stretch both arms and use them for localization. Allow yourself to feel: 'Is there enough distance between my arms and the wall behind me? ... Is there enough space between my arms and objects or persons next to me?' Make space for yourself. You may move your chair or move the objects that interfere. Now ask yourself, 'All in all, do I feel comfortable where I am located now?' You may still change something in the space around you.

You may also try to stretch your arms up to the sky. Get a sense of the space up there. The space up there belongs to you as well. Ask yourself, 'The space above me, is it limited to the end of my arms or is it going further?' Maybe it goes further beyond the ceiling. Just feel it as it is for you.

*How do I feel physically with where I am?
Feeling my own state from within*

Now go back to your breath again. Become aware of your breath as it comes in and moves out of your body creating some inner space. You do not have to do anything with your breathing. Just notice it without judgment.

Ask yourself, 'As my breath sinks down while breathing out, do I feel this downward movement inside?'. To get a sense of downward orientation you might sense into your feet on the ground. To find your feet you can bend your toes just to feel. Bring your feet into focus and feel the ground below. As your breath is sinking downwards while breathing out, your body might get a sense of gravity. Maybe something inside your body is sinking down or softening a bit.

Now ask yourself, 'How do I feel right now in my physical presence as a woman or a man sitting or standing here?' Check inside and just wait ... Say 'hello' to whatever you may find without judgment.

How does my body feel with all that is here and what it is like here?

Perceiving the surrounding environment

We are now going to explore the space around you. You can get a sense of space and distance using both your arms. But this space is limited. Your listening capacity can reach out much wider than your arms can do.

Imagine you have a directional microphone that is supporting your listening capacity. This microphone can capture sounds from great distances. Maybe you want to prick up your ears: What kind of sounds can you hear with eyes closed? ... I invite you to touch your clothes and listen to the sound of this touch. ... Now focus on the sound of my voice ..., any sound outside this room ..., the sounds from the street. Just reach out with your ears as far as possible. What can you hear from far away distance now?

You can use your arms for orientation. Maybe you want to show with your arms where you can hear something from, from what direction. ... Reaching out with your ears and arms you get a sense of your wider environment. You get a sense of your acoustic territory. Allow yourself to feel this acoustic space. All this space belongs to you.

Forming a demarcation line

I invite you to touch yourself again and listen to the sound of your fingers on your clothes. You also might touch the skin of your face and stroke your cheeks. What kind of sound do you hear from that 'close' distance?

Now imagine the acoustic space around you is wide open. This space stretches from far away to very close. Within this space you are free to make a demarcation line that keeps off any sound you do not like to hear or comes too close to you. Maybe this is the voice of someone who is devaluing and criticizing you. Maybe there is some other sound. Notice whatever sound is showing up in your imagination. How far away do you want this

sound to stay? How close do you allow this sound to come?

Imagine the demarcation line is symbolising your No to this sound. Your No is keeping this sound out. What distance of demarcation feels right for you? Please check while setting up your demarcation line inside. Ask yourself: 'Do I feel safe and comfortable within my acoustic territory with the demarcation I am setting up right now?' You can always change the distance of the demarcation so that you are sure you feel safe and comfortable.

Making my demarcation visible

Now imagine you want to show your demarcation to a person who is deaf and cannot hear. Please show this person clearly where you decided to make the demarcation line in your imagination. You may use both your arms to illustrate this. Imagine you truly want the deaf person to get it right.

Maybe you want to draw your demarcation line on the floor or use objects to mark it. To visually mark your demarcation line helps the deaf person to see the space you decided is yours.

Ask yourself: 'Which art materials are characterising my demarcation in best ways?' Does it match to glue paper together and create a fanfold, cover its front sections with colours or words and place it upright? Does it need to build boxes from card board and wire them together like unbreakable bricks? Does it suit to use cotton cloth (or parchment paper), dye it and take it as a flexible demarcation? What is promising to create the type of demarcation you need for yourself (clay, strings, elements from nature, decorating furniture or cushions as symbols ...)?

Now that the demarcation line is visible, check again: 'Does this feel right to me?'. You may close your eyes, and feel the distance from within. Ask yourself, 'How does it feel in my body to have the demarcation line set up this way? Does it feel right and all fine?'

Maybe you want to make some changes to the symbolisation on the floor. Check with your body to see if you feel comfortable with the symbolisation as it is and the distance you placed it. When you have a sense of 'okay', just appreciate and stay with it. Spend some

time with this feel of 'okay'. Feel the quality of safety the demarcated space is holding for you.

When you notice thoughts or feelings coming up that prevent from feeling 'okay' or safe (e.g. voices from the inner critic), allow yourself to write them down on a sheet of paper. Place the paper sheet(s) at the other side of your demarcation line (empty backside top) and check the distance for a sense of rightness. Go back to your body by touching it (chest or belly). Ask your body in a friendly way: "Please, can you help me find the sense of 'okay' anew and freshly?". And then wait, the body is doing the work for you.

Allow yourself to let the sense of 'okay' and safety sink into your body. You may stay with it in silence or you may invite an image to show up for your overall feeling of 'okay' and safe... If an image comes, check the image with your body to see if it matches from the inside. If the image does not feel right, let it go, and invite another image to come from your body sense. If you get a gesture, a movement, a sound or a phrase instead, that's fine. Just receive whatever you get from within.

When you have the image or any other symbolisation from your body's inner wisdom, take your time to come back into the room. Maybe you want to write what you received in your journal or express it in gesture, movement or sound. If you received an image, approach your art materials freshly and choose what feels right to express with (art materials: pencils, crayons, different chalks, water colours, finger colours, coloured paper, coloured strings, different kinds of textiles, clay etc)

After you have finished your artwork, see if it feels right to address the artwork itself and dialogue with it. You may ask: 'What do you have to say to me? ... What do you want me to know that I do not yet know? ... What is the more of ... you are carrying into my life?' Any answer you get is welcome. Just wait and receive. Make sure to bodily anchor the answers you got.

Wrapping up you may thank your body for its guidance. Maybe you also want to thank yourself for having stepped out boldly, claiming your own existential ground and expressive voice.



Effects of aligning space and demarcation

Experiencing one's own existential right of space can be described in these ways (Maas, 2002, p. 6):

In terms of being physically present: I feel the tension and the relaxation. I'm aware of my disposition. I want to put down roots. I'm landing. I'll make contact with the earth.

With regard to internal and external perceptions: I am aware that I exist. I am present. I feel and understand my own boundaries. I meet feelings. I take myself seriously. I meet my self-esteem.

In terms of linguistic self-expression: I'm shielding myself. I align my inner compass. I connect to my anchor. I make myself the owner of my own experiences. I am aware of my charisma.

In terms of relationships with others: I come to the here and now. I feel safe. I take a seat. I am taking distance from my problems. I am stepping back a little. I make contact with my

surroundings. I become aware of myself both physically and mentally. I distinguish myself from others. I am demarcating my territory.

Exploring one's space and right of existence in such a bodily way empowers the client to realize what belongs to his/her basic life equipment and must not get lost in environmental and cultural expectations, demands or norms of significant others. His/her relational existence can be redefined, mostly in a promising way. The client comes to existential self-expression in terms of his/her being in the world. He or she is able to be real with his or her state of being. He or she literally has arrived in his/her own existence and is enabled to express himself/herself in attentive presence.

The exercise will require considerable efforts for persons whose family background prevented the naturalness of owning one's space and setting boundaries. They have to try out, discard and try again many times to fully feel and embody their right of owning their presence. For these persons it is often overwhelming to experience that there is an inner knowledge about demarcated being-in-the-world. Clients I worked with testified: 'I never knew I have boundaries up to now,' 'I

get a sense of "me" for the first time in my life,' 'My space with demarcation feels like a huge egg, and I am sitting in the middle of it, feeling totally safe. This is a brand new experience for me.'

Repeating the exercise those clients learn to trust their implicit body knowledge and their capacity to create a living ground that supports them to be seen and be recognised as the person they are. Over time, Therapeutic Creative Arts practitioners will witness their clients losing social anxiety and give way to self-expression and natural radiance.

I would be delighted to hear about your experiences with the exercise. Please email to:

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