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## Mindfully Discovering One's Authentic Self

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# Mindfully discovering one's authentic self

By Lisa Sosin, Ph.D., Liberty University

*To know and cultivate the truth, we need to differentiate what we are aware of from the experience of awareness itself. Making this distinction between, say, a thought or feeling and the awareness of the thought or feeling is a first step to moving from cohesive states of defensive adaption to coherent states of truth-filled living.*  
(Siegel, 2011, p. 93)

There is a compelling link between counselee symptoms and the developmentally based capacity to put authentic thoughts, feelings, and choices into words (Greenspan, 1997). When emotional safety and secure attachment are not available and “scaffolding” was not provided to support the development of these capacities, truth is still spoken, but at an undifferentiated, behavioral level, instead of clearly represented with words. Often the symptoms people come to counseling with are related to these undeveloped or constricted aspects of the self (Siegel, 2010). The ability to tolerate and regulate painful emotions is a highly complex skill that requires practice and discipline in the context of an attuning relationship (Siegel, 2011). For many who come to counseling, these complex skills can be learned in the context of the attuning relationship that we provide (Greenspan, 2007).

In this article I present a mindfulness/art tool I use with myself, counsees, and graduate students that promotes the ability to know, tolerate, experience, and express the truth about oneself. First, steps for using the tool are provided followed by a case example based on my clinical experience. I encourage interested readers to learn more by exploring these two excellent texts: *The Mindful Therapist* (Siegel, 2010) and *Art Focusing* (Rappaport, 2009), from which this tool derives. Activities such as these, when practiced regularly, not only help free us from inflexible and disorganized ways of responding to ourselves and others, they literally change the brain and how it functions (Siegel, 2011).

## Supplies:

1. Large white drawing paper (i.e. 16 x 20)
2. Variety of colorful crayons, thick and thin markers, regular and colored pencils (don't forget the “dark” colors).

Important note: Before starting, provide a rationale for using the tool, link the use of the tool to the case conceptualization, and explain that in counseling, art is for discovering authentic feelings, thoughts, and personhood; not for creating a nice art project that could get an A in art class. Once you receive consent, proceed with teaching the steps.

## Steps (note: provide directions that are developmentally appropriate):

1. Start with deep breathing (i.e. “in four, hold four, out four”).
2. Focus inward and imagine a safe place (“nothing you have to be or do there”).
3. Stay in your safe place until a felt sense of security and peace arises (“a sense of your self being safe and loved just as you are”).
4. Depict your safe place in words, colors, or pictures at the center of a large piece of paper leaving plenty of room to depict other content around it.
5. Focus your attention on your senses, thoughts, and feelings related to current life situations that are disturbing you and causing difficult feelings (i.e. shame, guilt, or fear).
6. Depict these issues/situations with words, colors, or pictures, with some distance from the safe place but all around it on the paper.
7. From the vantage point of your safe place, focus on the content depicted and select the circumstance, situation or experience you need/want to focus on right now. *(continued on following page)*

8. With compassion and kindness drawn from focusing back on your safe place as needed, focus your energy and attention on this selected situation and depict the details on the paper around the original image that represent this event (“tell” the story of the event and feel and represent your actual feelings and thoughts related to this event) using colors, words, and/or pictures.
9. With compassion and kindness toward yourself, listen for “the rest of the story” and the truth of what **you** think, feel, and need in this situation. If you get distracted, confused, or disorganized in your thinking, go back to your safe place, repeating steps 1-5, and then focus on this issue again. When ready, depict what you notice.
10. Continue with this process until your relationship with yourself feels compassionate, warm, and open in relation to this circumstance or situation and you have a sense of closure.

### Clinical Example

Felicia found out that her best friend Tanya had been lying about something very important for over six months, just weeks before they were scheduled to leave for India to volunteer with the Peace Corps for the next two years. Felicia and I had previously worked in counseling on her goal of staying warmly connected with her family, while also differentiating in areas that she experienced as toxic and incongruent with her personhood. When this crisis arose, she contacted me to reinitiate counseling.

Felicia felt pressed by her family to cancel her plans and completely cut off contact with Tanya. Her parents and siblings’ anger, sense of betrayal, and disdain for Tanya were all she could notice and focus on. Felicia stated that she just couldn’t sense her own thoughts and feelings about this situation; only what she described as nebulous confusion; the voices of family members a cacophony of “shoulds” swarming around her. Because we had used this tool effectively in our counseling previously, Felicia decided she would like to use it now to connect with her own experience and voice. She easily got to her safe place and depicted it on paper. I watched as her body relaxed and her breath deepened. We stayed in her safe place for several minutes. When she was ready, she focused her attention on Tanya and the present crisis from the vantage point of her safe place, and tears began to flow. She vigorously began to color, write words, and depict images. I remained quiet and present; nodding and attuning as she intermittently glanced at me during this process. Every now and then she spoke out something brief related to her process and I could sense her undulating between shame, rage, and deep sadness.

Felicia looked up at me when she was done, her countenance peaceful and resolved; the tumultuous and undifferentiated sea of emotion inside of her calm. She proceeded to cohesively narrate the story and to piece together what **she** thought and felt, and how **she** wanted to proceed. After some time, tears still rolling down her face, congruently expressing her grief, she said this: “the “din of other voices has receded; I feel stronger and reconnected to my own soul now... I know what I need and want to do.”

Moments like this remind me of the integrating power of truth and how giving space for persons to discover their truth, to really know, feel, and speak it, is, perhaps the most important and, dare I say sacred, aspect of what we do.

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