

Accessing Experience I (Clearing a Space)

Clearing a Space (CAS):

1. CAS is a step within *focusing* (Gendlin) that can function as a separate, stand alone task.
2. It is useful for participants dealing with traumatic situations, or who are having difficulties with engaging in *focusing* or maintaining an appropriate therapeutic focus.
3. The concept of a *working distance* is relevant here, defined as “an optimal state of emotional arousal for exploring one’s experience.”
4. Participants who are struggling with emotional dysregulation often alternate between being too close or too distanced from their emotions. They either push away from emotions or strongly contain the emotions, shutting themselves down. They become too immersed, identified or overwhelmed, and as a consequence become disorganized, anxious, panicky, or paralyzed by the frightening emotions. In either case, they cannot access or make use of the information strong feelings contain, and no change can occur.
5. CAS directly addresses the attentional difficulties by manipulating the *working distance*, and helps restore a productive relationship with the painful memory, experience or emotion. It identifies an immediate focus for work when the participant may be at a loss for what to work on next.
6. If the participant does not have a clear sense of what to work on, CAS may be appropriate. CAS may only take only a few minutes, or with a highly distressed participant it may take a good deal of time.
7. The goal of CAS is to achieve an internal state or sense of safety or “free space” inside. The key is to find a way to develop and maintain a productive *working distance*.
8. Different approaches work for different participants, and sometimes this is only discovered by trial and error.
9. Strategies include: (1) moving problems away from the self, usually by imagining pushing them into the corners of a room, or out in the hallway; (2) using containment metaphors, such as a box, jar, or closet that can be closed, tied shut, or locked; (3) imagining a safe place or activity in which to locate the problems; and (4) picture moving oneself out from under or away from problems, or imagining some kind of protective layer or “breathing space” between oneself and one’s problems.
10. Try not to impose a particular strategy on a participant, but instead be creative and identify a unique method for your particular participant’s *working distance* difficulty.

11. Sometimes it is particularly difficult to distance or contain the issue so you may need to work on the problem a little, enough to label it, and return to it later. Sometimes you can “negotiate” with the problem, and find out what it “needs,” especially what it needs to “go into the box” at least for now.
12. Steps for CAS for attentional focus difficulty:
 - **Stage 1: Marker.** There are two main types of attentional focus difficulty, overwhelmed and blank.

Overwhelmed by Multiple Concerns:

- a. The first form of attentional focus difficulty is *feeling overwhelmed*. Here the participant is emotionally flooded by worries, painful experiences, panic, or trauma, and feels confused, engulfed, overpowered, or disorganized.
- b. The participant is often overidentified with the problem, and can’t distinguish between “me” and “my problems.”
- c. Sensation becomes a flooded experience when intense levels of emotion seem to burst out with little or no control and minimal conceptual processing, so “you feel you can’t think straight, organize your thoughts, or communicate clearly.” Behavior can become impulsive or extreme as one cannot process new information, or consider another’s point of view.
- d. The therapeutic task is to contain feelings sufficiently so they can engage in thoughtful processing aimed at differentiating and evaluating their emotions and behavior rather than being driven by them.
- e. In this underregulated or underdistanced state a form of CAS referred to as “finding a safe place” is useful. Ask the participant to imagine a safe “place” clear of intruding or threatening difficulties and go there. Use as much imagery as is useful; be sure to populate it with lots of color and detail.
- f. Markers of the overwhelmed state include the following types of statements: “I don’t know if I can bear the pain....It’s just so overwhelming....I’m afraid I won’t be able to hold together....I’ve got so much on my mind....I can’t seem to organize myself....There’s just so much....I feel paralyzed.”

Feeling Blank:

- a. A second form of attentional focus difficulty is *feeling blank*. Here the participant is overdistanced from his/her feelings or underaroused. There may be a loss for what to work on or how to proceed; nothing stands out as particularly important.

Blank states may also reflect uncertainty about the role one is suppose to enact.

- b. Start by asking the participant to use the CAS task to call up a list of current concerns, and to identify the most important one to work on.
- c. Markers may sound like, "I don't know what I'm suppose to talk about....I don't really have anything....I don't know what to pick....Nothing is coming to mind....Nothing is happening....Can you suggest something?"
- d. Once you identify the marker, obtain the participant's agreement to work on CAS

- **Stage 2: Attending to Internal Problem Space**

- a. Start by inviting the participant to turn their attention inward "to the middle section of your body, where you feel things."
- b. Acknowledge that it may feel a bit overwhelming right now and check out if you are pushing too much. See if they are willing to proceed with some space clearing
- c. Help them get comfortable and see if they are "safe" enough to close their eyes, and take a few deep breaths
- d. Help them find a place where they feel safe enough to look at the stuff inside of them.

- **Stage 3: Listing Concerns or Problematic Experiences**

- a. Help the participant run through their current difficulties or immediate concerns, listing and setting aside each one in turn.
- b. You can ask the participant to list the things that "keep you from feeling good or that are bothering you." I also will sometimes ask them to say to, "Everything in my life now is perfectly the way I want it to be."
- c. Ask them to grab or pick the thing that feels most pressing right now. I often refer to it as a *thing* or as *there's something about*_____.

- **Stage 4: Setting Aside Concerns or Problems (Partial Resolution)**

- a. After briefly describing each concern, suggest imaging putting it aside, up on a shelf, in the corner, or outside. Let the participant be creative.

- b. Ask if able to do this “putting aside” to ensure that there are no difficulties with the task.
 - c. Then continue with “Is there anything else that is keeping you from feeling good?” This returns you to Stage 3, listing concerns. Cycle between stage 3 and stage 4 until there are no more concerns or problem left.
 - d. Partial resolution occurs if able to set aside concerns.
 - e. As you put each item away in a box for example, you can ask what it needs for the participant to be safe
 - f. Mention periodically that you are trying to clear up some space for them in there, and “What’s keeping you from being clear?”
 - g. When all is said and done see if there is any area still troubled or if there is any background concern.
 - h. Remind them to breathe, that we’re allowing for some clarity to come in, and that if anything is too difficult we may need a bigger box.
- **Stage 5: Appreciating Cleared Internal space (Midlevel Resolution)**
 - a. Further resolution is achieved if after setting things aside the participant is able to appreciate a few minutes of relief, freedom, easing, or safety
 - b. You can suggest they stay with and explore the F-S of cleared internal space, and help him/her symbolize the cleared space.
- **Stage 6: Generalizing the Cleared Space (Full Resolution)**
 - a. Full resolution occurs if able to develop a general appreciation for the need, value, or possibility of maintaining a clear or safe space in his/her life to deal with overwhelming or painful feelings. The establishment of such a “stillpoint” can be extremely valuable
 - b. The participant comes to imagine a friendly accepting internal space, and is able to separate self from problems or concerns. This can lead to a consolidation of an internalized sense of safety, a relief, and a greater sense of wholeness.