

Amelia S. Robinson, MA
Louisville, KY
dali.lyon@gmail.com

Art Therapy Directive: Abstract Feelings Dictionary

Objective: To assist a client's ability to identify and express emotions and create an opportunity for the development of emotional awareness

Materials: Graphite pencil and Large white paper, folded and torn/cut into 8 rectangles

Process: Working together with the client, we compile a list of 8 emotions that are relevant to the client's present life process. In addition to honoring the client's contributions, I encourage a balance of positive and negative emotions on the list. The list could read: Sad, Frustrated, Joyous, Nervous, Excited, Happy, Afraid, Calm.

The client is then invited to take the pencil and the first rectangle. I use verbal cues to encourage the client to become aware of their physical body in the chair, to notice his/her breathing, and explain that I will say one of the feeling words. For example, if the first feeling was "nervous", I would announce it, and then guide the client, "If you are comfortable, close your eyes. Recall the sensation of being "nervous." Does it have a shape, a color? Is it big or small, wavy or straight? Allow the sensation to travel right down your arm, through the pencil and onto the paper. Keep your eyes closed if you are comfortable. Put "nervous" right on to the page." (This can be timed – "take one minute to complete this image.") When the client is finished drawing, I have them label the image with the corresponding word, if they are able (this can be done before or after drawing). I always try and conclude the group of 8 with a feeling word that is typically associated with comfortable sensations, such as "calm" or "joyous."

There is no wrong way for this client's feeling experience to look, though I mention at the start that we are aiming for abstract responses, lines and shapes rather than concrete images (smiley faces, etc.). However, any image will contain good information for the client and myself.

After completing the list of feeling images we place them where we can see them and begin to process. I like to be curious about what the client notices when looking at them all. I might ask questions about which feeling the client experiences most often or least often. What is the most uncomfortable feeling? Which feelings have images that appear similar or most different? When was a time when you felt _____? The objective is help the client increase their emotional awareness.

To add another layer to the processing, I have led clients in creating short poems about each feeling. For example, let's say the image for "nervous" includes lots of squiggly lines. The feeling can be named by the client:

Nervous is squiggly lines all over.

It is the color _____ and it smells like _____.

Using the image, the senses (touch, taste, feel, smell, hear), and color or shape to put words to feelings have resulted in some amazing short poems by clients, big and small. I've witnessed this result in client pride and a sense of mastery.

Feeling-images can be bound into a "Feelings Dictionary" and added to or referenced back to over time. Also, I have had clients want to paint or use color in this exercise, which is no problem at all.