

# Clearing a space

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## Abstract

In September 2010 and again in February and June 2011, Christchurch in New Zealand was shaken by devastating earthquakes of magnitudes 7.1, 6.3 and 6.4 respectively. This case study describes an initial series of stand-alone arts therapy workshops I implemented with school children aged 5 to 12 in the Bay areas. The sessions, entitled *My Favourite Place*, provided a fun activation of imagination to aid children in coping with the stress of the quakes. The sessions merged aspects of the 'Clearing A Space' process adapted from Rappaport's Focusing-Orientated Art Therapy with sensory elements of the practice of Mindfulness and a focus on psychological resilience and positive emotions.

## Key words

Natural disasters, Focusing, children

## Introduction

September 2010, and February and June 2011 saw Christchurch shaken by devastating earthquakes. These tremors took lives, broke buildings and businesses, and left those of us who live in the vicinity enduring aftershocks and fearing further large quakes. In February 2011 I was in the early stages of my arts therapy career and took on this therapeutic role, assuming my place should be on the frontline, helping 'victims' tell their emotion-laden tales. I stumbled, however, over my own numbness, my inability to concentrate, my unwillingness to delve into and be fully present with my own anguish, the tension between my need for self-care and my sense of 'duty' to help others. And I saw this mirrored in those around me in the small port town of Lyttelton, my home and the epicentre of the February quake – the most destructive of the earthquakes.

This intimate personalised awareness formed the foundation of an initial arts therapy workshop response I implemented with intermediate school children in the Bay areas. These gentle *My Favourite Place* sessions

recognised the infancy of our journey through trauma by merging aspects of 'Clearing A Space' adapted from Focusing-Orientated Art Therapy (Rappaport, 2006, 2010) with sensory elements of Mindfulness and a focus on psychological resilience and positive emotions (Tugade, Fredrickson, & Feldman Barrett, 2004). This combination seems to have provided a fun activation of imagination to aid children in coping with the stress of the quakes. In this paper I discuss the theoretical underpinnings and then describe the client group, the group arts therapy processes, challenges and future directions.

## Trauma, FOAT, mindfulness and psychological resilience

### Trauma

Natural disasters, such as earthquakes, often cause trauma, described by Dyregrov as "overwhelming psychological strain" (2010, p.11). Trauma may be produced if an experience:

- is unexpected, life-threatening, or non-normative;