The Power of Presence and the Therapeutic Alliance

Why presence is the foundation for lasting healing and change

Amy Phoenix
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The feeling arose from some deep place inside, nearly taking her over. She wasn’t sure what she was experiencing when he said, “It’s just a sense I am having, but possibly something is coming to the surface. You can just ride it, kind of like a wave.” Although she could not intellectually understand what he meant, she could feel where he was pointing. As she gained her equilibrium and rooted herself in her seat, she breathed deeply and let the stress pass through. Light headedness set in and quietness enfolded the sacred nature of the session. She was the client and he was the coach, helping her reclaim her life after years of feeling powerless and abused. The basis for the therapeutic alliance was presence. While presence is not commonly included as an aspect of psychological theory, I feel it is central to the success of the therapeutic relationship. (Tannen & Daniels)

What does it mean to be present with a person? In my experience, being present with a person means seeing the person as a being of infinite potential – even if the person is on her death bed. Being present is to see a person for the innate value they bring to humanity and the world, for the commonalities and the differences, for the rawness and the humility. It is being with whatever arises in a space of welcome acknowledgment. Quite often, presence equates to deep acceptance and reverence. Although presence is talked about in various pieces of literature regarding therapy, there is no one standard or definition of presence in the therapeutic relationship. Tannen and Daniels describe presence as being authentically open with a person, and to their needs, in the moment. They also point out that presence largely determines how a therapist applies a technique because presence speaks to the therapist’s way of being. (Tannen and Daniels)

People aren’t problems, problems are problems. The therapist who can see the truth of this statement not only has an awareness of narrative therapy and social constructionism, it is likely she can also be real about the tendency to judge another and choose something different. She can choose to be present with a person, exhibiting values such as empathy, respect, genuineness and warmth. (Kilpatrick & Holland, p. 33-34). Not only can she exhibit these values during a session, she lives them. She works on herself and her own personal growth continuously, to prevent from becoming entangled or overly involved, as she cultivates the space for insight, realization and growth in her clients.

The space created by the clinician’s ability to be present to herself and her clients opens the door for endless possibilities. Where techniques may lead toward specific outcomes, presence is the door to the limitless. What place does this have in therapy? A very important one. The relationship between the clinician and client largely determines the outcome of therapy for various reasons, one being the opportunity for therapeutic catharsis. The value of this catharsis is based on the belief that the
human nervous system possesses its own healing process for clearing out trauma. Clients who feel safe and heard in therapy may reach the point where the floodgates of trauma open wide for unfelt feelings to surface and work their way through so the trauma is no longer traumatizing. Reports indicate such catharsis can lead to profound healing and long lasting change. (Von Glahn)

The ability to facilitate the space for therapeutic catharsis can be influenced by a practitioner’s nature of nondirectivity. While robust techniques may have their place and certainly provide structure and knowledge for the therapist’s navigation of problem solving with the client, overuse of directives during the therapeutic relationship may actually close in on the client, minimizing the important space to release that which no longer serves. (Von Glahn) In contrast, presence allows the therapist to be with what is arising in herself as well as the client so she can utilize any pertinent knowledge while assisting the client in accessing her own wellspring of wisdom.

We can conclude that presence is an integral piece of the therapeutic alliance, but how does this alliance begin and stay strong? How do clients and clinicians come together to form and maintain these collaborative relationships? In my experience, a person chooses to work with a clinician when problems reach a tipping point. Previous to the tipping point, the person may feel like she can handle her life relatively well or at least she’s not ready to reach out for help. Once she reaches the tipping point, she knows she must secure the assistance of someone outside herself – or she may end up living a life of regret, by her choice to not make the choice to get help.

Therapists, on the other hand, are helpers. I imagine that there are very few clinicians walking the planet who didn’t get into the profession to help people. Since the field can be overworked and underpaid, it is not typically a job one chooses for the money. However, this doesn’t mean that all therapists are created equal, or that all therapists will bond with all clients. Sometimes, personalities don’t mix. Sometimes, the way a therapist works or helps people toward their goals does not jive for certain clients. People want to be validated when they are seeking help outside themselves. (Taber & Leibert, et al.) Interestingly, they might actually want and benefit from self-validation, but they may need to experience it from the outside before venturing in. The therapist fulfills this mirror sort of role and helps the client through listening, empathizing, offering insights and assisting with problem solving.

As I reflect on the nature of the therapeutic alliance, I am moved to agree with Debbie Hall, a psychologist in San Diego's Naval Medical Center Pediatrics Department. Quite simply, I believe in the power of presence. (Hall) I have experienced over and over again in my life the difference between

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therapists and others who could not be present with me, and those who could. The way I feel in relation to the person’s ability to help me is profound. I couldn’t open up to the person who was focused solely on my problem or the past. I feel safe with those who see me for me and who can be with me in whatever I am feeling and facing.

Similar to the parent-child or any other influential, guiding relationship, the therapeutic alliance can be reduced to book knowledge and small talk if presence is not part of the equation. Presence calms the waters of confusion, opens the door for healing, closure and new realizations. While people may see it as a spiritual euphemism, I see it as a necessary part of life. Actually, I experience it as the basis of life and I feel it is the doorway to the success of any helping measure – whether it be parenting, partnering, hospice or psychotherapy.
Resources


Amy Phoenix is a mother of five, parent educator, meditation facilitator, author and aspiring body artist committed to cultivating force free, trust full relationships. She is currently studying human services and psychology with Columbia College while she writes the book, Force Free Parenting, one blog post at a time. Amy can be contacted at mail@amyphoenix.com.