

The Gift of Presence

A Guide to Transform Your Work and Your Life

Part Two: Therapeutic Presence in Action

by Suzanne Scurlock-Durana

Developing and enhancing your therapeutic presence involves a distinct set of skills you can learn, practice and ultimately master—but in order to do so, you may need to make a major shift in the way you approach your work. Part One of this two-part series explained the benefits of therapeutic presence and self-care. Here, in Part Two, are some practical guidelines for increasing the steadiness and strength of your therapeutic presence before, during and after each of your sessions.

Before the session

- Nurture the conviction that you deserve to take care of yourself. Your effectiveness as a bodyworker will increase dramatically when you embrace this core belief. This is not only good for your clients, it is an essential part of your birthright as a human being.
- Take a reading of where you are on the inside. Learn to read your inner landscape and take a moment to do so before each session so you'll know if you're energetically full or depleted. If your energy is low, take a moment to fill yourself before greeting your client.
- Connect to healthy resources. Learn the most effective ways to connect to the healthy resources that can fill you, so you can enter every session with a full, steady sense of presence. For one practitioner, this might mean feeling your feet on the ground, the steadiness of the Earth, and the nourishing energy it can provide. For another, it might mean taking a few slow, nurturing breaths before entering the treatment room. For a third, it might mean taking a moment to call on Spirit or summon the image of a special mentor or teacher.
- Set a clear intention. Consciously state to yourself what it is you want to accomplish. For instance, "I'm here today to hold a strong therapeutic presence for (client) Lenny, to meet him where he is, and to facilitate his healing process in whatever ways I can."
- Affirm current realities. Before each session, non-verbally declare, "I am here today, to hold this space, in whatever way I am capable, given: my current energy level; my skills and talents; the amount of time available; and the surroundings in which this is happening." Accepting the realities of your current circumstances, rather than denying them or trying to override them, can dramatically alter your experience and be a first step in creating a plan for the day that nurtures rather than drains you.

- Remind yourself that you are not the only resource for your clients. Everyone has a variety of resources and unseen support. Understanding this can save you from feeling overly responsible for your clients' healing process.

During the session

- Hold a space of compassion and acceptance for your client. A caring, non-judgmental attitude that lets you meet clients where they are is vital to healing. Some practitioners find it helpful to silently recite something that lets them climb out of their judging mind, like the Buddhist prayer, "May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you be healthy. May you be free." A simple prayer like this is one of many ways you can set this intention and deepen your sense of caring.
- Be a container large enough for the full range of experiences your clients bring to the table. Communicate through the steadiness of your presence and the openness of your body language that you welcome and can handle whatever memories, feelings or experiences arise during the session. In order to do this, you must have healthy boundaries. Until you can say "no" effectively, it is difficult to convey a wholehearted "yes" to your client's process.
- Establish and maintain clear boundaries. Learn to be present in your own body and know what your inner landscape feels like. This kind of intimate self-knowledge tells you where your body stops and your client's body begins. Learning to clearly differentiate your sensations and emotions from your client's is a critical skill for bodyworkers. If you work from inside your own body, without energetically leaning into your client, it feels a lot safer and more comfortable to them as well.
- Be aware when you're being triggered to your own emotional issues, and know what to do about them. Signs of this might include feeling uncomfortable, needing the client to be a certain way (the client has to be relaxed and comfortable) or see you in a certain way (expecting clients to see you as the authority in their healing process), trying to control the session more than is helpful, and needing to talk when silence would be golden.
- Listen to what your body, hands and intuition tell you. Our bodies provide us with a magnificent navigational system. As we regain the ability to be in our bodies, we naturally develop our own unique set of receptors that inform us about our client's physical, emotional and spiritual state. Learning to read the signals from this rich navigational system might include: listening to your gut feeling about whether a session is going in the right direction or not; sensing an emotion that is about to bubble up in someone before they actually express it; and feeling drawn to an area of the body that your client has not yet mentioned, but which is in pain or needs your attention.
- Let your client's body tell you what it needs. You can do this by asking yourself: "What is the quality of energy under my hands—does the client's energy meet me and soak up what I have to offer easily or does it initially push me away?"; "Where is energy flowing, or not flowing, in my client's body?"; and "Are there other images that come up when I

lay my hands on them, such as fullness or emptiness, colors, textures, different resonance?” Don’t censor this incoming information; you can always analyze it later if need be.

- Listen carefully to what your client tells you during the session. You can do this by listening quietly; making soft, affirmative sounds to acknowledge that you hear her; or by gently paraphrasing back what she said so she knows you heard her clearly. Simply being witnessed by another human being in this way is deeply healing in and of itself.
- Honor your client’s process and pace. If you’re holding a healing space for someone’s most ingrained, painful internal knot, one they’ve carried around for years, it may take many sessions for the healing to come to completion. Deep-seated physical and emotional tensions can take time to resolve. It is not your job to judge the unfolding or pace of another person’s healing, but rather, to be present for the healing that can happen in this moment. If you try to resolve an issue in one session that has many layers and has built up over years, you will most likely end up feeling exhausted and depleted, and your client will feel pushed or won’t be able to fully integrate the work that you have done. Do what you can now and let the rest go.
- Maintain a vision of your client as whole, healthy and free of physical and emotional pain. At times during a session, you may be called upon to help your clients remember how far they have come when they are feeling discouraged. However, it can be challenging to hold a vision of your client as healthy and whole when his problems are severe and multi-faceted. Yet it is essential that you do so. Learning to see your client’s full potential and capacity to heal is one of the greatest gifts you can give.
- Help clients get in touch with their own capacity for self-healing. Your role is to be a compassionate witness, a loving guide. You create the conditions in which healing can occur, but you are not the healer. The ultimate gift you can give your clients is to help them uncover their own capacity to heal themselves. As you release tension and trauma from their tissues, your clients will naturally get more in touch with the things that nurture and nourish them in life and will begin to make healthy choices.

After the session

- Get feedback from your client. Ask your client how he feels on a physical, mental and emotional level. In the process of talking with them, you will be teaching your clients to pay attention to the subtle inner signals they need to discover and discern. For instance, you might ask: “How is the pain in your hip now, compared to when you came in?”; or, “Your headache was a seven when you got here. Where is it now on a scale from one to 10? Has the quality or location of the pain changed?” By asking for specific information, you helping clients notice things they might have discounted before. You empower them to listen more effectively to their own inner landscape.
- Acknowledge your clients’ courage and commitment to heal. This can help them feel less like passive consumers of services and more like proactive partners in their own

healing process. This is particularly important when someone is feeling discouraged by setbacks or slow progress.

- Help your clients stay aware of the bigger picture. Note the changes you see in each session, comparing this session to previous sessions. Share any long-term progress you have observed. Clients need your feedback when they are not yet able to sense the shifts you are picking up. Often when I point out some long-term changes at the end of a session, my client responds, “Oh, yeah, that is true. I just wasn’t paying attention to that.”
- Make suggestions for supplemental or follow up work if appropriate. This might include suggestions for future work together or referrals to practitioners of other complementary approaches, such as acupuncture, psychotherapy, journaling, yoga or movement.
- Take care of yourself. Remember to leave the session feeling full yourself. This might mean standing and holding the client’s feet while you take a few minutes to breathe deeply and feel the Earth supporting and filling you up. It might mean closing with a silent prayer of appreciation for the healing and relaxation that has just transpired. It might also mean eating a snack or taking a short break between sessions.
- Close each session with an attitude of gratitude and acceptance. This will help you stay in the present moment with each client, rather than being caught up in regrets of things you didn’t do or worries about what might be coming next. Acknowledge what you have done well, note the changes you want to put in place during your next session, and then let go of what is beyond your capacity to do at this time.

Practicing the principles of therapeutic presence takes patience and ongoing commitment, but it is well worth the effort. Our work is richest when we can be in each moment with our clients, in a space of caring and compassion that enables us to receive as well as give to them in every session. As an added bonus, the ability to become a container for someone else’s healing brings us into a deeper state of grace and resonance. Everyone receives from this equation. In this paradigm, to give is indeed to receive.

Suzanne Scurlock-Durana, C.M.T., C.S.T.-D., creator of the training and audio series Healing From the Core: A Journey Home to Ourselves, has taught CranioSacralTherapy and SomatoEmotional Release for more than 20 years.