

**Complementary Therapies and Wellness:
Practice Essentials for Holistic Health Care**

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Chapter 7: Developing Therapeutic Presence

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Chapter Objectives

- define therapeutic presence
- understand the concepts of being grounded and in touch with one's inner knowledge and external resources
- outline principles which can be used to develop therapeutic presence
- understand how to bring therapeutic presence into the therapeutic setting

Therapists are trained to examine and analyze a client's physical condition as well as their motivation and attitudes in order to help them attain healthier functioning. Rarely, if ever, are therapists trained to examine and analyze their own motivation, attitudes, and role in the process. In the last decade health professionals have become aware that the outcome of any given therapeutic intervention is significantly influenced by the therapist's ability to hold a strong healing, or therapeutic, presence. This makes it necessary to include oneself in the equation of the healing process through which clients are going.

In this chapter therapeutic presence, which is the unspoken, unseen connection between therapist and client that occurs in every therapeutic intervention, will be addressed. This means knowing how to remain connected to one's resources, grounded, attuned (i. e., not feeling numb), and fully present in the face of challenging, sometimes emotional, therapy situations. It means being empathetic and feeling connected to clients without taking on their frustration, anxiety, pain, or grief. It means facilitating a healing therapy session while honoring one's own boundaries and the boundaries of the client. To accomplish this means learning how to be in

touch with and nurturing of oneself, so that the therapist's therapeutic presence can catalyze and nurture the healing process for clients.

This can create a challenge, because many people have been taught that it is somehow bad to focus on their own bodies and emotions--that they should choose to ignore pains and suppress feelings. This chapter addresses the "how to" of regaining the innate sense of self knowledge each person is born with. In some circles this is defined as "inner knowing." In other contexts it is called "internal and external sensory awareness" (Gendlin, 1982). Whatever it is called, the reader will learn about paying attention to the subtle cues received constantly from the body and the surrounding environment, cues the reader may have been taught to ignore, if raised in Western culture (Capra, 1983).

For those who feel they would be overwhelmed by their emotions if they were to deeply and truly feel them, this chapter will discuss how to tolerate and modulate such feelings. This allows a person to have emotions and learn from them rather than tamp them down for fear of being completely washed away by them - embarrassed or seen as unprofessional. During times of stress or personal tragedy, this is particularly important.

The chapter also addresses enhancing one's sense of external resources (see "Defining Grounded" on page x in this chapter) and using this sense to develop a feeling of renewal and confidence, building from experiences in the present and past.

Finally, the author will explain how to bring this inner knowing to any given therapeutic setting in order to have it inform and guide the process for a positive outcome that nurtures and promotes healing for everyone involved. This ability to hold a therapeutic presence will enhance all of the therapist's other skills, manual and verbal, and it will assist therapists in staying healthy

and in not burning out with today's demands and schedules. The reader may even choose to apply these principles in other areas of life.

Therapy Focus

It is vital to attend to yourself as a therapist. The principles described in this chapter provide therapists with a foundation to begin to understand their own sense of inner knowledge and external resources. This should strengthen treatment interventions, optimally facilitating health in your clients and yourself, and prevent feelings of depletion and burnout that can result from not being in touch with oneself.

The Five Principles

Quantum physics has taught that on a molecular level, everyone exists in a virtual sea of energy (Capra, 1975; Gribbin, 1984; Murchie, 1967; Pert, 1997; Zukav, 1979) and that each person is an integral part of that energy field, affecting and being affected by everything around them, simply by being present. The following principles, developed by the author, provide an underlying foundation for how this unseen energy field operates in each person's life and interactions with others, especially in therapeutic relationships. It is helpful for the therapist to be able to recognize one or more of these principles when they are in action, so that knowledge of them can help to guide, rather than control the therapist. They are all equally important in every person's life, in different ways, and they interrelate with each other all the time, so they are not hierarchical in nature. Therapists may find that in a given situation they are aware of one or more of these principles playing a major role in how they feel and act. In a sense

the principles are like signs on a map. They form much of the unconscious context from which we live. And they form much of the unspoken context health professionals use in therapeutic relationships, in the treatment room or clinic.

Defining “Grounded”

Being “grounded” refers to feeling connected in a steady and enduring way to inner knowledge and external resources. Being grounded is an invisible but tangible sense of connection to nurturing, nourishing energy. Metaphors for feeling grounded and methods for creating a grounded feeling vary from person to person. Some of the ways people refer to feeling grounded to an *external* resource include:

- feeling connected to a skill level.
- feeling “rooted” in the earth.
- feeling the energy of the sun or another aspect of nature.

Some people refer to feeling grounded to *internal* knowledge as:

- remembering the feeling of a peak experience.
 - the calm sensation of a steady, even breath.
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Principle I: Connection and Separation

This principle highlights the skill of recognizing the range of internal sensations that all people have, from feeling deeply connected to what gives us joy in life, to feeling completely isolated or separate from the joy and nurturing that life offers. Recognizing whether one is feeling separate or connected to life in any given moment provides valuable information for making life decisions, both large and small. Each person has an innate capacity to feel his or her

own internal and external connection to the self and the world. If therapists know how to give and receive in a way that nurtures themselves deeply, they can often be more in touch with their internal sense of satisfaction and connection to the world that they live in. Small experiences become very important and informative; for example, a person can be renewed by taking a walk in the forest while breathing deeply, or by holding a small infant and feeling the joy of the newness of that life. Likewise, one can use “negative” experiences or information to enhance health. For example, if one is coming down with a cold and begins to feel sick and disconnected from a healthy state of being, this disconnected feeling can inform people to go take the vitamin C, a hot bath, or to rest.

When people recognize that, as human beings, they are born with this capacity for inner knowledge, then they can also note that, as they grow up in today’s culture, certain experiences can cause it to slip away. In order to better recognize and reclaim one’s sense of inner knowledge, it is necessary first to acknowledge the sense of separation when it crops up in one’s life, private and professional. People are taught to work faster and harder, to knuckle down and push for the goal at all costs (this is true from school schedules to gift shopping). People’s deeper needs, emotional and physical, are often relegated to a lesser status. People smile and say they are “fine” when truly they are not feeling that way at all (Pert, 1997).

The first half of this principle is recognizing how connected or disconnected one is feeling *within oneself* in any given moment, and then using that awareness (with as little judgment as possible) to begin moving back in the direction of connection to one’s aliveness, the deeper sense of oneself in this world. Jon Kabat-Zinn, in his groundbreaking programs with chronic pain clients at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, teaches the importance of internal sensation mindfulness, using different practices (following the breath, watching

thoughts), in order to reach a sense of calm or quietness. When that sense of connection, or quiet, is achieved, body physiology improves (e.g. with decreased cortisol levels), pain tolerance increases and pain levels often decrease, and hopefulness, one's sense of possibilities for the future, increases (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, 1990; Pert, 1997).

The second half of this principle is to feel a sense of connection to the world and external resources from that quiet inner place. This is simple to write about, but can be more difficult to achieve. So many things in today's culture conspire to keep this from happening. The cultural context in which one is raised *can* allow people to keep their innate sense of internal and external connection that they are born with, and to deepen it as they grow (and thus to gain wisdom). However, it rarely does. Instead, people find themselves rushing through the day or planning their lives based on what they were told is the correct way to do it--without ever realizing that by learning to reconnect, internally and externally, they can tap a vast and deep reservoir of knowledge and guidance in order to live a more self-actualized life. This skill allows people to take in and understand what other people convey and sense internally, whether it rings true at that moment, and act on it accordingly.

Principle II: Acknowledging and Widening One's Perceptual Lens

This principle highlights that each person has a particular perceptual lens through which he or she experiences the world. People need to *recognize* that it is just one view of life that is unique to each person and is not necessarily reality. In order for people to be able to let in the amount and variety of information that is available they have to *widen* their particular lenses.

A person's upbringing, physiology, and all life experiences go into creating these lenses. They are invisible and unconscious in almost everyone. They can be thought of as the perceptual background context from which people live their lives. There is little that is fixed and universally

true in terms of how one sees, experiences, and then interprets the events of one's life. A client was shocked several years ago to have a heart-to-heart conversation with her sister and to discover that she had an *entirely* different emotional experience of her father while growing up than her sister did. They were not that different in age, grew up in the same household, and it confounded her until she remembered this principle. Everyone interprets what they see and what happens to them, and then they create beliefs about life or themselves based on these interpretations. On a very simple level, think about how hard it is to get agreement about exactly what happened at the scene of an accident. Each witness has his or her own perception and story about exactly what happened.

Understanding clients from a narrow viewpoint can impede therapists. When therapists judge a client's particular health care issues too narrowly, it is possible to miss what may help clients heal the fastest, or, what may even impair the healing process. A colleague of the author's shared an extreme example of this. Early in her career a therapist in the same rehabilitation facility was fired for telling a young man, newly paraplegic, that his disability was God's revenge on him for something bad he had done. Needless to say, this was a crushing pronouncement to give anyone in the vulnerable state he was in at the time. Yet from her "perceptual lens," that was why he had ended up in a wheelchair.

There are many more subtle examples of judging clients. For instance, if a therapist holds the perception that no matter what he or she does for clients, it will never be enough, then this will affect how the therapist interacts with clients and interfere with his or her capacity to help clients heal. Some therapists spend too much time with each person, trying to "do enough" (to no avail) and ending each day exhausted, burnt out. Or, conversely, some therapists may not try to connect much at all, doing the minimum necessary to get by, because they are sure they won't

succeed or that their efforts will not be enough--so why try? In both cases, a perceptual lens can be so much a part of the therapist's self image that he or she may not even be conscious of it.

The next key to this principle is remembering that a person's perceptual lens and belief systems will shape the nature of what people can *receive* moment by moment. It is important for a person to be open to receiving internal knowledge and external resources. If people have a particular lens that says they cannot feel vulnerable and open without disaster occurring (perhaps based on *real* past experiences of those disasters), they may also have problems receiving any internal or external sense of safety that would allow them to experience their vulnerability.

People can begin to correct this narrow viewpoint by becoming more conscious about realizing when it happens and then choosing to respond differently. For example, in the moment people realize they are perceiving a situation through a "narrower lens" than they would like, they need to make a conscious decision to perceive this experience in a new and different way. Using the example from above, they may want to imagine themselves open to the possibility that they *can* feel vulnerable *without* disaster striking so that they don't have to pull away. After people focus on the possibility of something new, they should note any changes in internal sensations and movement of energy. It may be slow and subtle initially, but important, valuable changes can take place when this principle is engaged in this way (Rossi, 1986; Erickson, & Rossi, 1979).

Principle III: Reclaiming, Honoring and Reconnecting All Parts of Oneself

to the Whole – Body, Mind, Spirit and Emotions

This principle recognizes that all people are unique at the core of who they are, that their spirits are one of a kind, and that they need to acknowledge their uniqueness and reconnect the parts that may feel isolated or separate. This principle also acknowledges that in order to have a

clear sense of connection to oneself and to the world, it is imperative to have a good “felt sense” of one’s physical body and one’s spirit. Another way to describe this felt sense is knowing where one stops and the rest of the world begins. This entails having healthy boundaries: boundaries that allow the therapist to connect with what is good in the world and separate from what is not wanted. This is best done by having a nourishing sense of energy flowing through every cell of the physical body (Cohen,1997; Eisenberg,1987). In this principle, the author uses the metaphor of a container to symbolize the physical body and a river of energy to denote a healthy flow of life force (Erickson, 1988). This means that a person’s skin and the energy field that flows through and around it is one’s boundary. In the best of all possible worlds, this boundary is respected by everyone.

When a person’s “container” is full and flowing with nourishing energy, the person often has a much clearer sense of himself or herself internally, as well as a sense of where his or her boundaries are. The person can choose to connect at will with the surrounding world and has a clearer choice about what to do with someone else’s negative feelings. This is particularly valuable if a client is in physical or emotional pain or is expressing something that is unpleasant for him or her in the course of a treatment session. If therapists utilize the skills underlying this principle, they will be less likely to end up feeling exhausted or burnt out by the treatment process and their interactions with such clients. In other words, if therapists stay full and maintain access to whatever source of energy feeds them, they are a lot less likely to carry away a client's anxiety, pain, grief, or other emotion. It would be like trying to put more water into a glass that is full and constantly being refilled as the river’s flow moves through it.

This principle also speaks to the larger process of integration of all of the parts of a person. People have different parts of themselves that were not safe to fully experience when

they were growing up, such as aspects of their sexual or creative selves. This might have to do with the culture one grew up in, with family, or religious faith or practices. However, people operate optimally when all aspects of their minds, bodies, emotions and spirit are in constant connection and dialogue. This means that whether one is making a big decision, such as what to do with life after graduation, or making a less important decision, such as choosing food from a menu in a restaurant, it is important to include all these parts of the self in the decision-making process. When therapists begin to live this integration, there is a sense of connection and an informing that occurs (some would call this intuition or knowing). People who can do this are natural guides through the maze of how to be present, what techniques to use, and what to say to a given client for the client's highest good and the therapist's own as well.

For many therapists, the hardest part of this integration is recognizing and trusting the subtle cues of the body. Most people have no problem gathering the data. They know whether the prospect of taking a given path makes them feel happy or sad, scared or anxious. But is it the best step to take at this moment, for oneself and for others?

Inner knowledge lies in the integration of all of this. The body can be thought of as a person's navigational system for inner knowledge. Its signals can give a clear indication of which direction to head in, given all the information--emotional feelings and physical sensations. Unless one knows how to feel and respond to all of the body's signals, it is difficult to use it as a navigational tool. If people live primarily in their heads, as much of today's culture does, they may make logical, reasonable decisions. But will their decisions include the wisdom of the heart? Many therapists are addicted to staying busy and having a full schedule. Often, these therapists have described being numb to their feelings and their bodily needs. They end up with

severe muscular tension and exhaustion that keeps them from being able to offer 100 percent of themselves in their therapy sessions, not to mention in the rest of their lives.

Alternately, if people live dominated and overwhelmed by their emotions, they may make decisions that feel absolutely true for that moment, but are these decisions for the highest good when those closest to them, or the bigger picture of life, is considered? If people live dominated by their sexual drive, or by addiction, they may have momentary satisfaction. However, chances are those physical drives are felt to the detriment, if not obliteration, of all the deeper, more subtle, sensations of one's spirit (integrated with body-mind-emotion) that enrich and inform the totality of one's being. So, this integration, coupled with a connection to what is safe and nurturing and informing in the world (i.e., external resources), creates a powerful, deep intelligence from which to operate.

Principle IV: Continually Connecting to Your Resources

This principle builds on the last one and yet it stands alone as well. Unless people constantly remember to stay connected to their inner knowledge and external resources, they burn out. This is particularly true for those in health care. It is simply not enough to know *how* to remember the connection and establish a stronger flow of nurturing, nourishing energy. This principle emphasizes that people need to live it, to practice, to remember to *feel* this connection in each moment.

When therapists do not live in this connection to their inner knowledge and external resources, it is easy to be less focused in treatment. It might look like this: While I am in a treatment session with client A, I am thinking about client B coming next and what time I need to leave in order to make it to my dental appointment after work, as well as what I need to pick up at the store on the way home. Therapists may be vaguely aware of feeling pulled in a million

directions, and their current clients are definitely not getting the therapist's best. Instead, therapists should try working with the mind, harnessing its focus and acuity to refill themselves energetically and to notice what is going on in their internal awareness as they notice what is going on in the treatment of the client.

The world, as well as one's internal environment, is incredibly complex. In order to utilize this inner navigational system that people are born with, they must first remember to renew their sense of energy all the time. People need to know how to listen to all of the signals, nuances, and information provided by internal knowledge and external resources. This enhances a larger sense of who they are and what they are capable of as therapists and human beings.

Principle V: Recognizing and Honoring One's Internal and External Resources

This principle notes that it is necessary to know in the very core of one's being, that people *are* supported moment to moment by an ever-present, unconditional source of nourishing life energy. As noted earlier, people live in a sea of energy that contains a wide range of resources. Many people would agree, in concept, that this is true. In some circles this is known as faith. However, when the therapist has inadvertently lost his or her connection to this source of energy or become depleted from stress or challenge, it is important to remember and really *feel* that support by stopping and connecting with it.

Activities to Connect to Your Resources (highlighted box)

The experience of grounding is different for each person, because everyone accesses and then creatively expresses this life force or source in his or her own way. It could manifest as stopping and saying a prayer. Kabat-Zinn (1994) teaches people to focus inside, quieting the breath, and calming themselves. It could manifest as taking a needed nap or putting on a piece of music that

helps a person calmly focus. The author teaches people imagery of connecting and filling up from the earth's field (Scurlock-Durana, 1996). Writing or drawing about something stressful can enhance inner knowledge by helping organize the experience. The reader will want to answer the following question affirmatively when identifying grounding activities: "Do I feel more of my body, or do I feel nurtured by my external resources, when I engage in this activity?"

Helpful Guidelines

Having outlined the five basic principles that provide a foundation for health care practitioners to hold a strong therapeutic presence for others and for themselves, guidelines for creating and holding that healing presence for another person are reviewed below.

1. In holding a strong, therapeutic presence for another person or situation, it is imperative that one remembers that this is a state of *being*, not a *doing* skill. Simply put, all the words, manual techniques, or protocols that therapists follow are a part of *doing* skills. What is being discussed here is the invisible, but very powerful, skill of *being* present in all that one is, in a therapeutic way for another person. When people are in this state of being, they feel connected, full, and present for other people. They can sense a flow of energy that feeds them as well as the other person. In this skill, giving and receiving essentially become one and the same (Trout, 1990).

Often, therapists have the ingrained habit of giving out all of their energy into treatment sessions (doing), and only noticing the depletion at the end of the day. By being aware of this state of *being* full as one goes through the day, therapists can continually nourish and refill themselves consciously. Take a quiet moment to take a few good deep breaths. Feel the solid support of the ground, receiving what is needed from it. Say a quiet prayer or meditate on gratitude.

2. It is imperative in holding a therapeutic presence that therapists have a clear intention about it.

This means that:

(a) They are aware of how *they* are doing that day, energetically. Are they feeling full and fresh, or depleted and stressed out? In any condition they may find themselves, if they can stop, check inside, and honestly admit to themselves how they are doing, rather than automatically buckling down and tightening their jaws to make it through the day, they will be much better off. When therapists find themselves depleted, it is important to simply take the time to rest back in themselves, connect more deeply to their internal knowledge and external resources, and fill up before beginning. This “conscious use of self” will be invaluable in preventing burnout.

(b) Therapists must acknowledge their skills and talents. This means trusting the quiet whispers of wisdom that are heard when connected and in a good flow of life’s energy. It is important not to second-guess oneself in this area. Trust what is known and use it. Don’t pull back when experiencing a knowing, intuitive force to move forward in a particular direction.

(c) Therapists must set a clear time boundary with clients, which is neither rigid and cold nor too soft and pliable. When a good strong therapeutic presence is established with someone, it is amazing how much healing can occur in a short period of time. Time is almost irrelevant. As this intention is set clearly, the life force that is being brought to bear for that client that day will show up and do all that needs to be done for that person. When therapists consistently run overtime with clients, they must ask themselves, “Is this coming out of a sense that I am not doing enough, that I need to do more to “fix” this person?” Such an attitude leads to burn out. If therapists find themselves always looking for the right technique in course after course, the one that makes them feel like they know enough, then the right technique may not be an active *doing*

skill, it may be learning how to hold a strong therapeutic presence, how to *be* with clients in a new and more relaxed way.

(d) Therapists need to know and acknowledge the space in which they are working. This means understanding its limitations, but also letting themselves be surprised by how much can happen under any circumstances. The author has seen good therapists working in situations where there is little privacy or time, and the clients know it, yet manage to heal and release all kinds of things in ways appropriate to the space and time. Obviously, this is not optimal. But, the therapeutic presence held for clients, under any external circumstances, can become the dominant force in that healing situation-- not the external details.

3. Therapists must remember to constantly access their internal knowledge and external resources for nourishing energy. This must continue throughout the session, although they will find that they don't need to be "intending" it constantly once this habit is well established. When people know how to fill themselves and continually access their resources for energy, then they are not depleted as they hold a therapeutic presence for other people. In fact, they will often be in a much more expanded, delightful state of awareness due to this constant filling process. As mentioned earlier, therapists will also find that if clients are in pain or discharging something that is unpleasant, therapists will not absorb that other energy as it is discharged. Remember the image of trying to put more water into a glass that is already full. When people stay full and maintain access to the resources that feed them, then they are less likely to walk away with other people's anxiety, fear, pain, or grief.

A corollary to that guideline is to remember that each therapist is not the only source or resource for that client. This understanding should prevent therapists from becoming overly responsible for any other person's healing process. The signal that indicates a therapist is

accepting too much responsibility for the healing of clients is the thought, "I'm not doing enough." Or, the therapist may feel that he or she has not done enough until a client's entire healing process takes place or comes to completion. This is not to suggest that therapists ever leave anyone in the middle of a crisis. However, if they are holding a therapeutic presence for someone with a long-term illness or a very serious injury, they may have to hold that therapeutic presence on many different occasions to have the *whole* healing come to completion. And, it is important to understand that the therapist cannot be the judge of that unfolding, its pace, or time frame. If therapists try to hold it all in one space in time, they may find themselves exhausted and depleted. Everyone has other resources and unseen support. When therapists insist on doing it all themselves, it is as though they don't trust that support .

4. Remember that the therapist will be holding a space of unconditional positive regard for the client-- an acceptance of whatever that person must do, at whatever pace, in order to bring that healing moment forward for himself or herself. In holding this unconditional space for another person, therapists may even find themselves able to be a therapeutic presence for the dying process in a way that creates healing even into death.

The corollary to this guideline is that the easiest way to hold unconditional positive regard for another is to hold it for oneself as well. This needs to be noted, because sometimes in this process, therapists hold such an empathic space that they forget to keep filling themselves and holding their own "container" of being. This may feel like slipping forward energetically into the other person because of the strong empathy for what that person is going through. The key, again, is to continually remember to remain connected to one's own sense of internal knowledge and external resources.

5. Remember that one's body is like an incredible navigation system. People hear and sense their inner knowledge best when they are focused on the present. When people's focus moves from the present, they begin to miss the signals and lose contact with their own inner knowledge and external resources. Or, they become so connected with someone's pain that they miss the cue that reminds them to sit further back in their body and ground, connecting to their resources, so that the client can feel a foundation for what he or she is working on.

Summary

The five principles and guidelines discussed help create a strong therapeutic presence. When a therapist begins working with clients it is important, in order to achieve the greatest results, to maintain this presence. By continually connecting to one's inner knowledge and external resources not only will therapists be able to hold a strong unconditional therapeutic presence for clients, but they will likely end the session full of energy, despite the intensity of what transpires.

Study Questions

1. What is therapeutic presence?
2. What is the significance of therapeutic presence?
3. Briefly discuss the five principles described in this chapter.
4. Describe two activities (one internal and one external) that help you feel grounded and reflect on how this can be used in your work as a therapist.

Resources

[Healing From the Core: A Journey Home to Ourselves](#) (audio series)

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