

The Gift of



Presence

A Guide to Transform Your Work and Life Part One: The Unspoken, Unseen Connection

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.

These four stories all have something in common:

Jim comes home from a full day at the spa after doing a number of back-to-back massages. He started the day tired, didn't take time for lunch, and forgot to pay attention to his body dynamics while working. When he gets home he collapses on the sofa, his back aching, too exhausted to make something healthy to eat. He spends the evening mindlessly watching TV and munching on junk food. He wakes up the next morning even more exhausted than he was the night before and wonders why he dreads going to a job he used to love.

Dorothy, a craniosacral therapist, starts the day feeling well, but after working on Tyrone, a client with severe, chronic pain from whiplash, she notices that her own neck is aching and that her range of motion is reduced—problems she didn't have before the session. It takes her many hours to release the aching and stop thinking about the awful situation Tyrone is facing in his life.

Mariana is a deep-tissue bodyworker whose client, Lisa, has made only sporadic progress dealing with ongoing hip-and-knee pain resulting from a skiing accident. Mariana finds her sessions with Lisa running long because she wants Lisa to be pain-free at the end of every session. Despite years of training and experience treating similar problems, Mariana worries that Lisa's lack of progress is due to her own failings as a practitioner. She wears herself out doing more and more with less and less confidence, and begins to dread seeing Lisa's name on her schedule. The very thought of working on her makes Mariana tired.

Lucas' long-term client, Frank, comes in for his regular session two weeks after his son was killed in a drunk-driving accident. As the hands-on session gets underway, Frank's eyes fill up as his grief quietly surfaces. Sensing Frank's anguish, Lucas imagines what it would be like to lose his own son. He feels his heart clutch, then quickly tamps down the feeling so he can be there for his client. Frank, sensing Lucas' discomfort, stops crying and sinks back into a shutdown place. The rest of the session is uncomfortable for both of them. After the session, they avoid eye contact—and Frank leaves, feeling he can never let his guard down with Lucas again.

So, what is it that these stories have in common?

They represent common dilemmas faced by bodyworkers in today's massage-therapy world. I first became aware of these types of problems in 1983, as a new massage-school graduate, and my understanding has deepened during my 19 years teaching CranioSacral Therapy and SomatoEmotional Release for the Upledger Institute. In my role as colleague, teacher and mentor, I've seen these and similar scenarios play out again and again, both in my work with new practitioners and in my consultations with advanced bodyworkers who long ago mastered their manual skills.

It's become increasingly clear to me that the outcome of any given therapeutic bodywork session is significantly influenced by the therapist's ability to hold a strong, healing presence. This unspoken, unseen connection between therapist and client occurs in every therapeutic bodywork session. Making the most of this connection means learning how to remain grounded, connected and fully present in the face of whatever comes up.

This can be daunting, emotional work. It means being empathetic without taking on the client's pain. It means facilitating a healing process without inadvertently violating the client's boundaries or losing your own. In short, it means learning how to be in touch with and nurturing of yourself, so that your presence can catalyze and nurture the healing process of others.

Hold on to your energy

To be therapeutically effective as a bodyworker, your energetic bank account needs to stay in the black. Yet I'd say that eight out of 10 bodyworkers give their energy away as soon as they get it, because they love helping people. And in their enthusiasm to help, they fall into the habit of paying attention to other people's needs before their own.

In the short run, you can get away with that. But when you continue to give from a depleted core, without replenishing yourself, burnout is sure to follow. In order to maintain a steady, healing presence for your clients, you need to recognize when your reserves are low and develop healthy ways to nourish yourself.

That's where a paradigm shift comes in. Rather than putting your clients' needs first, you need to initially focus on your own self-care. Learning to build and maintain your own store of healthy inner resources has to become your first priority. It's much like oxygen masks on air-

planes. As flight attendants always remind us, "You have to make sure your own mask is securely fastened before helping the person beside you."

This two-part article will teach you the steps in putting on your own oxygen mask first. But before delving into specific strategies, it's important that we look more fully at the reasons *why* developing a stronger, more stable therapeutic presence is essential to you and your clients.

Benefits of presence

Developing a reliable therapeutic presence is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself and your clients. The benefits to both parties in the healing partnership are profound and wide-ranging.

When you are more grounded and present, clients can relax more quickly. It is easier to let go of tension and soften in the presence of someone who is energetically full and steady. Clients feel that their deeper needs are being sensed and taken into account, whether they are consciously aware of this or not. They feel it when you meet them with your touch, connecting to their tissue fully, and this creates the safety and permission necessary for deep relaxation and healing.

As you become more aware of what nurtures and feeds you in a healthy way, you will become more stable and grounded, and will be more able to accurately honor your client's internal pace of relaxation and healing. It becomes less and less likely that you will push them or miss important cues from them. This enables clients to trust their own healing processes and more fully release places that are tight and restricted. Deeper release means more profound healing, a positive outcome for both of you.

Learning to embody a steady, strong therapeutic presence significantly increases your ability to feel what's going on with your clients. This energetic connection becomes a palpable, rich resource for you, a reliable source of information that can help guide your work, moment by moment, appreciably increasing your effectiveness.

Developing greater therapeutic presence is also a potent antidote to burnout. As you learn to nourish yourself with healthy resources, you won't get depleted when you hold a healing space for another. You will no longer pick up the pain, grief or toxic feelings that are often released in the healing process, because there's no place for them to be absorbed—it would be like trying to put more water into a glass that's already full. So instead of unconsciously b-

ing the pain your clients may be discharging, you walk away from sessions feeling energized, intact and whole.

Finally, your confidence in yourself as a healing presence will increase as you embody these skills in your practice. Bodywork practitioners who apply the principles of holding a strong therapeutic presence develop a deep trust in their feelings, skills, intuition and wisdom.

The second article in this series will offer a set of practical guidelines for increasing your sense of therapeutic presence before, during and after each of your sessions.

Therapeutic Presence in Action

It's early morning, and I was up with a sick child several times in the night. When I check in with myself I realize I am more depleted than usual—yet I have a number of massage sessions scheduled.

Although I feel heavy in my bones, I roll out of bed and head outside to take a rejuvenating early-morning walk. As I walk, I feel my head clearing. I begin to pay attention to the Earth under my feet and how steady it feels as a support. I consciously let the Earth's energy flow into my body to nurture myself—and boy, do I need it today!

When I get home from my walk, I feel much better. Still, rather than assume I can do everything I had planned, I call and cancel a couple of peripheral commitments I had later in the day, so I can rest and take care of myself after my morning sessions.

As I wait for my first client, Beth, to arrive, I set a clear intention to be there for her without draining myself. I remind myself not to take too much responsibility for her healing process.

Beth has chronic pain from migraines and a fall on the ice several months ago. Earlier in my career, I would have poured all of my available energy into Beth in an attempt to reduce the severity of her issues, and I would have ended up exhausted and depleted. Now I know she will get exactly what she needs and that I am capable of giving it to her without feeling drained myself.

When Beth arrives, we sit and talk for a minute. I notice her eyes look a little foggy today and that she isn't her usual happy self. I note this and gently ask how she is doing. I know she struggles at home to create stability; she has an alcoholic husband and chronic money issues.

As Beth tells me what's been happening in her week, I listen and connect to her, trusting that our session will help her return to her life with less pain and more resources to deal with her problems.

Once Beth is on the table, she asks that I help her get her gut moving, since she has intermittent problems with constipation caused by her pain medications. I gladly do this,

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 CranioSacral Therapy and SomatoEmotional Release for the Upledger Institute since 1986, and for the past 10 years has provided staff-development training at the Esalen Institute.

and as we work together unblocking these areas, I let her system know I am listening by bringing my conscious attention to meet her tissue fully as I touch her.

As I work on her, I let Beth talk and occasionally ask her questions that take her to happier times when she was feeling better. She laughs. Later in the session, a painful memory comes up, and I gently hold space for it by remaining present and steady as she expresses the frustration and futility she feels in her marital situation. Internally, I feel empathy for her suffering, but as I check in with my body, I can tell that I am not taking on her pain.

As the session unfolds I get to a place on Beth's belly where there is tightness, and I wonder out loud if it is painful. Although the tissues all around this place have welcomed my touch, this place feels guarded. She says it is tender so I lighten up and slow down my movement, tuning in to what the tissue is asking for. I get a sense that I should just give it energy for a minute or so, and then gently ask again about movement that would open it. It responds well to my listening so closely with my hands. Slowly it opens and Beth breathes more easily and deeply, relaxing more on the table.

And so our session goes. I get a sense of where we need to go next as the hour unfolds—as though Beth's body is silently directing me as to where, when and how long it needs each part to be touched. We talk about what she senses would be best for her to do after the session to keep this openness in her belly. I can see that she has regained some of her hope about the possibility of feeling better.

As the session wraps up, I stand at Beth's feet, grounding her and myself. She walks out connected to her foundation again. We set up her next appointment, and as I look into her eyes I can see she has her sparkle back. I can feel how different she is—and I am grateful for what I have been able to contribute to her healing process.

— Suzanne Scurlock-Durana