

## 14. Therapeutic Presence

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### Therapeutic Presence: An Essential Way of Being by Dr. Shari Geller

This chapter discusses:

- A definition and description of what therapeutic presence is... and what it is not
- Therapeutic presence as a foundation to Rogers' core conditions
- Research on therapeutic presence in relation to process and outcome
- Practical exercises to enhance the cultivation of therapeutic presence

Therapeutic presence is a way of being that reflects therapists' full engagement in the moment-to-moment encounter with their client. This level of being with the other allows the client to open up and explore painful issues in their lives in a safe and supportive relational connection. Therapeutic presence is essential in developing a highly attuned and mutual relational connection that can lead to effective therapy.

This chapter elucidates the subtle qualities of therapeutic presence as based in a combination of person-centred theory, clinical experience, embodied practice, and over a decade of research. While presence is not a new concept for person-centred therapists, what may be innovative is discussion around the language, care, preparation, and process of therapeutic presence, which can contribute to the cultivation, sustenance, and therapeutic benefit of this essential therapeutic stance.

#### **What is Therapeutic Presence?**

Therapeutic presence is defined in part as bringing one's whole self into the encounter with a client, being completely in the moment on a multiplicity of levels, physically, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, and relationally. Presence also involves being grounded in one's self, while receptively taking in the verbal and bodily expression of the client's in the

moment experience (Geller, 2001; Geller and Greenberg, 2002; 2012). While this inner receptivity involves therapists' openness to the client's multidimensional internal world, it also involves openness and contact with therapists' own bodily experience in order to access the knowledge, professional skill, and wisdom embodied within. Being fully present then allows for an attuned responsiveness that is based on a kinesthetic and emotional sensing of the other's affect and experience.

With therapeutic presence, the depth of the therapists' own being is reaching out and touching, as well as open to being touched by, the depth of the other. A relational therapeutic presence then emerges where the meeting of the two people is in service of healing for the client; which allows for an alignment with and activation of the natural tendency towards growth (see 'relational depth', Chapter xxx [Schmid]).

Therapeutic presence can also be viewed as a way that therapists monitor their own experience in therapy. Through an enhanced sensitivity to the client's experience, therapists can use their selves and their attuned bodily awareness as tools in understanding and responding to the client as well as to sense how their responses are facilitating the client's therapeutic process and the therapeutic relationship. The therapist's bodily sense of the client's experience is a reflection of an inner synthesis of the client's expressed and felt experience with the therapist's own lived experience and his or her professional expertise. The therapist responds from this felt place of being attuned in the moment with the client

Therapeutic presence also allows for an optimal and healthy state for therapists. Being and practicing presence allows therapists to work through and release the emotional residue associated with deep person centered relational work, which results in lowered stress, anxiety, and burn-out.

### **Therapeutic Presence and Rogers' Relationship Conditions**

Research suggests that while there is a relationship between aspects of therapeutic presence and Rogers' therapist-offered conditions of empathy (Chapter xxx, Freire), congruence (Chapter xxx, Cornelius-White) and unconditional positive regard (Chapter xxx, Bozarth), presence is a distinct quality that provides a foundation for these conditions. Rogers near the end of his life, began to articulate the underlying quality of therapeutic presence when he noted that:

I am inclined to think that in my writing I have stressed too much the three basic conditions (congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding). Perhaps it is something around the edges of those conditions that is really the most important element of therapy – when my self is very clearly, obviously present (in Baldwin, 2000, p. 30).

According to Rogers, being present is an embodiment of the therapeutic conditions (Baldwin, 2000).

After Rogers' death, person-centred theorists have continued to explicate presence as a possible underlying condition to the relationship conditions (Bozarth, 2001; Bugental, 1983, 1986, 1987; Geller & Greenberg, 2002, 2012; Geller et al., 2010; Schmid, 1998; Thorne, 1992; Wyatt, 2000). What therapeutic presence appears to add to empathy, congruence, and unconditional regard is the preliminary necessity of receptively being clear and open to receive the totality of the client's and one's own experience (Geller & Greenberg, 2012). Therapists' presence thus can be viewed as the receptive condition that allows the TOC to emerge.

### **Presence and Empathy**

Therapeutic presence reflects being grounded and spacious within one's self while being immersed, open and receptive to the other. This grounded, receptive and non-judgmental openness to the client's experience, allows therapists to be in an optimal position to empathically attune and understand clients' experience as it is expressed in the moment.

Therapists can be present without being empathic. In fact therapeutic presence is a first step towards empathy, and is necessary for empathy to occur. In order to understand and reflect empathically what the client is experiencing, the therapist needs to first be in an open and receptive stance. Hence, the therapist can be present without being empathic, they can be present in order to be empathic, and they can be present while being empathic. However, the therapist cannot be empathic without being present. The process of empathy then is optimally enhanced when the therapist is first grounded in the present within one's self and with the client, as well as open and accessible. .

We understand that to be empathic to others, one must first be able to be present with the other. However, what is important for training purposes is to understand that to be

fully present with a client demands that therapists cultivate a sense of presence within themselves first.

### **Non-Presence or Absence**

One way to understand presence is to explore what it means to be absent or distracted. This can include busyness before a session that prevents presence from emerging. Some examples of non-presence are listed below:

#### **Examples of Non-Presence**

Prior to Session:

- Busyness, moving from one session right into the next without pause
- Not listening to bodily needs such as hunger, thirst, bathroom needs
- Squeezing in email checking, calls, without a moment's pause
- Stress or overwhelm with own unresolved or ongoing issues

In Session:

- Continuous checking of time in session
- Predetermined idea of what is needed or what is "right" for the client
- Keeping too far of an objective distance from the client
- Being too enmeshed with client and losing a sense of self
- Self-judgment at own responses or misunderstandings
- Boredom, dull feeling, or sleepiness
- Preoccupation with events or needs prior to or after session
- Not hearing what client is communicating (i.e. missing words or whole sentences as well as not noticing non-verbal expressions)

Post- Session

- Lack of Vitality
- Fatigue
- Self-Criticism
- Relief that session is over

- Agitation
- Inner tension
- Lack of clarity or focus

The following is an example of how my own self doubt or judgment interfered with the ability to be present:

John wept as he spoke of the loss of his mother. He recalled an incident where he had a disagreement with his mother before her diagnosis of cancer and his incredible guilt of having walked out in an angry huff. As I was listening to him I began to feel anxious and overwhelmed, doubting my ability to help him with his complicated grief. He further expressed his unhappiness and self-doubt about his response and wished he could have replayed that moment differently as several weeks had passed before he spoke to his mother again, only to find out she had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. My anxiety grew as I began to hear my own internal voice say “you can’t help him...you don’t know anything about grief...you haven’t trained in this area....who do you think you are?” My responses to him were concrete and flat as I battled with the critical voices in my own head. He went silent and his tears stopped, while he shifted the conversation to the work chores he had to do. I felt the disconnection between us and did not know how to proceed.

The moment of disconnect to which this therapist is referring reflects a lack of presence and resulted in the clients’ silence and flat affect. However, therapists’ awareness of their disconnection or non presence can also offer an invitation to bring their attention back to the moment. To continue:

When I became aware of John’s shutting down and my own lack of presence and disconnection, I spent a quiet moment taking a deep breath and regulating my emotions by feeling my feet on the ground. The practice in presence that I had done allowed me to let go of my self-judgment and invite my awareness back into the room. I could then return with my full awareness to my client. I shared my noticing of my client’s silent and emotional distance, and wondered if it had to do with my distancing. We shared the sense of helplessness in the face of grief, and this open

and compassionate sharing not only allowed my client to open and express his layers of grief and despair, but also deepened the bond between us.

On one hand, not being present with our clients has potential harm to the process of therapy and to the client feeling understood, heard, and accepted. However, therapists' awareness of not being present can also be used to bring attention back to the moment. In this example, the inward attending and contact with self that is part of presence allowed this therapist to become aware of his disconnection and how his self-judgment resulted in a distancing with the client. He could then use his presence practice to invite his attention back to the room and to open again to the difficult feelings being experienced by his client, which also led to a repair in the relational disconnection.

Not having awareness of being absent or not having ways to regulate and bring one's self back to the moment can actually be more harmful. While the ideal of sustaining presence fully throughout a session is unrealistic; present moment awareness and practice can help therapists to notice when they are distracted or distancing, and to quickly realign and bring their awareness back to the client (i.e. in the example above by grounding, breathing, and letting go of self-doubt).

### **Research on Therapeutic Presence**

A series of studies have been conducted that have contributed to an understanding of therapeutic presence (Geller, 2001; Geller & Greenberg, 2002, Geller, Greenberg & Watson, 2010). The first therapeutic presence study was a qualitative study whereby seven experienced therapists were interviewed on their experience of presence (Geller, 2001; Geller & Greenberg, 2002). The interviews were transcribed and set to a qualitative analysis, which revealed a model of therapeutic presence. The model of therapeutic presence consists of three overarching categories, reflecting the **preparation**, the **process**, and the **experience** involved in being fully in the moment with a client in a therapy session. Therapeutic presence is an intense and rich experience of being fully in the moment with the client and a part of the healing process. The model of therapeutic presence is outlined in Figure 1 (as reproduced from Geller & Greenberg, 2002).

INSERT FIGURE x.1 ABOUT HERE

Therapeutic presence begins with **preparing** for presence, *prior to session*, by bringing one's whole being to the moment of meeting the client. This includes an intention and commitment to therapeutic presence, with an ability to bracket expectations, theories and preconceptions, and to approach the session with an attitude of openness, acceptance, interest and non-judgment. One way that therapists prepare for presence is to practice it *in their daily lives* through being present with others, meditation and attention to personal growth. Therapists describe the importance of ongoing care of self as essential to creating the opportunity to be in presence in session with a client.

When in therapeutic presence, the therapist is involved in a moment to moment **process** where the therapist oscillates or simultaneously experiences being *receptive* to the client's experience, *inwardly attending* to their own ongoing flow of experience, and *extending and contact* with the client. The therapist is ultimately guided by what is most immediate in each moment in a way that is with and for the client. The therapist receives the totality of the client's experience and uses that inner experience to understand and respond while maintaining direct contact with the client.

The actual in session **experience** of therapeutic presence begins with therapists feeling *grounded* in themselves. From this grounded place, therapists experience being fully *immersed* in the moment with their client, while experiencing a sense of *inner expansion* or spaciousness. Being grounded, immersed, and spacious is accompanied by the intent to be present *with and for the client*, being involved in a healing process in service of this the other.

The second therapeutic presence study involved the development of a measure of therapeutic presence, the therapeutic presence inventory (TPI), which was based on the model presented in Figure 1 (Geller, 2001; Geller et al., 2010). Two versions of the TPI were created and studied: One from the therapist's perspective (TPI-T) and the second from the clients' perception of their therapists' presence (TPI-C). The TPI-T can also be used as a self-audit tool for therapists to reflect on their degree of presence with a client (see Table x.1). Rate each item from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*). To work out a total score, add up all the scores from the non-bold items (which indicate presence), and take away the scores from the bold items (which indicate a lack of presence).

The third therapeutic presence study demonstrated that both versions of the TPI were reliable and valid (Geller et al., 2010). Further, clients' perception of their therapists' presence (TPI-C) was found to predict a positive therapeutic alliance and session outcome across Person-Centered, Process-Experiential and Cognitive Behavioral Therapies (Geller et al., 2010). Therapists' self-ratings were not found to relate to the alliance or session outcome, suggesting that it is clients' perception of whether their therapist is present with them that is important. Research has also suggested that therapeutic presence is predictive of the relationship conditions of empathy, congruence, and unconditional regard (Geller et al., 2010). With respect to presence and empathy in particular, findings suggests that they are related yet distinct (Pos, Geller, & Oghene; Geller & Greenberg, 2012); and that presence precedes empathy (Hayes & Vinca, 2011).

INSERT TABLE x.1 ABOUT HERE

Key messages from therapeutic presence research:

- Therapeutic presence relates to positive therapeutic alliance
- Clients' perception of their therapists' presence is essential to positive process and outcome
- Therapeutic presence underlies Rogers' relationship conditions in general, and empathy in particular.

### **Practices to Cultivate and Sustain Therapeutic Presence**

While presence is available to all of us, therapists' ability to access and sustain presence with a client is dependent on their skillfulness in self and other awareness as well as in relational connection. This requires inner training, ongoing practice and a commitment to continued growth and engaging in healthy relationships. Presence can be cultivated through enhancing qualities of presence (i.e. through pausing, clearing a space, grounding, self-care), as well as working with or removing the obstacles (i.e. busyness, technological demands, anxiety, unresolved issues, distractions) that can interfere with being present. Mindfulness,



which is a way of enhancing attention and awareness of the present moment, is also a helpful way of cultivating therapeutic presence (Gehart & McCollum, 2008; Geller & Greenberg, 2012; McCollum & Gehart, 2010).

Following are some practical ways to enhancing a sense of presence, before a therapy day, before a session, or in your own life. More experiential and mindfulness based practices for cultivating therapeutic presence can be found in chapter 12 of the book: *Therapeutic presence: A mindful approach to effective therapy* (Geller & Greenberg, 2012).

### **Pause**

If there was only one way that you could work to cultivate presence, it would be to pause. Taking a moment to pause is essential in slowing down enough to notice what we are experiencing or what is blocking our ability to be fully here with ourselves or with someone else. Frequent pauses throughout the day, accompanied by intentional and conscious breathing, can help to slow down our internal busyness and create a deeper awareness of our experience.

Another way to include pausing to enhance awareness and presence is to integrate a daily “slowing down” practice into your life. Taking any activity (i.e. walking to the office or class, washing the dishes) and slow it down to half the pace, you will begin to notice more of the subtle aspects of that experience. Pausing and taking a breath at a regular interval every time you see a common sight (i.e. a stop sign, reaching for a door knob to open the door of your home), will also create a space for presence to begin to emerge.

### **Breathing Deeply into the Moment**

A way to invite presence is to deepen and slow the breath. Taking longer and slower breaths allows for a strengthening in heart rate variability and hence can evoke a healthier environment in the body for presence to emerge. A way to begin this exploration is to start with our own experience, and explore whether attuning and slowing rhythms of respiration can help to evoke a calmer and more alert and attuned state of being in the moment. Try this breath awareness exercise in a relaxed yet upright posture:

- First, take a few breaths, counting to three on the in breath, and four on the out breath

- Now lengthen the time of the inhale and exhale, for example inhaling for 5 secs, pausing briefly, and exhaling for slightly longer than your inhale (i.e. 8 seconds)
- Allow yourself to visualize your breath becoming deeper, slower, and more relaxed – continue for 5 minutes
- Open your eyes and become aware of how you are feeling in this moment

### **Ritual to Open and Close your Therapy Day**

Having a simple gesture or activity to open to presence, at the beginning of a therapy day, as well as release any residual stress or emotions at the end of therapy day, can be helpful. This could include taking a moment to pause in your office, to state the intention to be as present as possible to your clients. This could also be reflected in feeling your feet on the ground and connecting to your breath, while intending to release any residual stress or emotion, visualizing it melting down your body and into the ground through your feet. A ritual can also be a physical act of opening yourself up to presence, such as engaging in a yoga posture such as tree posture, lighting of a candle (and extinguishing at the end of the day), playing a simple rhythm on an instrument, or visualizing clearing a space inside with the intention to become present. Choose something that works for you, and that reflects bringing yourself fully to the moment. Taking a few moments on a daily basis to engage in a presence ritual can begin to familiarize yourself with the experience of presence, and help optimize the conditions for presence to arise.

### **Clearing a Space**

Clearing a space inside involves putting aside one's own needs, concerns, issues, and agenda, in order to be open and accessible to the client and the depth of their experience, without assumptions or presuppositions (Geller & Greenberg, 2012; Gendlin, 1978, 1996). It is a conscious and intentional practice that is helpful before starting the day, for a few moments before each session, or perhaps after a particularly difficult session.

- Sit or lay down in a comfortable position with your eyes soft or closed.
- Become aware of the rhythm of the inhale and exhale of your breath
- Begin by asking yourself “what is between me and feeling fully present and at ease in myself right now” and wait to see what issues emerge. Spend a moment with each

issue that may arise, until you intuitively focus on one particular issue.

- Bring awareness of how you carry that issue in your body; noticing the physical sensations associated with the issue and just name them (tightness in jaw, butterflies in stomach, pit in chest, etc).
- Ask yourself for the intuitive feel or felt sense of the entire issue. Find words or an image for the feel or sense of the whole issue (such as frightened, scared, confused, frustrated).
- Now visualize putting that issue in a box or on a shelf, putting the whole sense of that issue aside (or use other images such as floating the issue down a river)
- Continue this process until all the issues have been named, acknowledged, felt, and put aside temporarily.
- After spending a few moments noticing and releasing barriers to presence, check inside to see if there is a background sense of presence or a cleared space inside
- Notice what that feels like and rest for a moment in that sense of presence.

### **Centering and Grounding**

Generating a sense of centeredness helps to access a steadiness within one's self while opening to the fullness of the other's suffering. Being centered, much like being grounded, is focused in the body (Geller & Greenberg, 2012). Finding a sense of center and ground can help to maintain equanimity, through the potential discomfort of opening fully to the clients' emotional pain and experience. The following exercises can help support the experience of grounding and centering.

- Stand with feet parallel to each other, firmly on the ground.
- Gently close the eyes and breath right into the center of your body.
- Bring your awareness to your feet, feeling the contact place where the feet meet the ground.
- Rock your feet gently forward and backwards and side to side to establish until you rest in a grounded and centered place.

- Now hold the spine upright and aligned, imagine a string at the top of your head being pulled upright from above you. Feel your feet firmly planted on the ground and your head upright and aligned with the rest of your body.
- Now bring your awareness to your centre of gravity, such as the center of your pelvis. Rest in that centeredness for a few minutes, breathing right into and from the center of your body.

### **Grounding: Tree Meditation**

- Pause, soften your eyes, and connect to your breath.
- As you inhale, imagine the clean fresh air filling your whole body. As you exhale imagine stress and tension dropping away through the soles of your feet.
- Now invite your awareness to the contact place where the soles of the feet meet the ground.
- Visualize roots growing from underneath your feet (or base of spinal cord if sitting). Visualize the roots burrowing deeper into the ground, going beneath the floor, through layers of soil and bedrock, pushing deeply into the earth.
- Bring awareness to the body, imagining the legs and body as the trunk of the tree.
- Visualize arms and head like the branches of the tree, knowing while they sway and move in the wind and changing weather, there remains a solidity and unwavering grounding in the feet and their connection deep to the earth.

The following are two other images that can support this posture. The first is to visualize the legs and spine like a pole planted firmly into the ground, imagining the whirlwind of experience around you, yet not touching the firmness of the pole centered and strong in contact with the ground. The second is to imagine yourself as a mountain, standing steady at the base, unwavering. Being aware of the various weather changes and storms, yet feeling the stability, ground, and strength of the unwavering mountain.

### **Box: PRESENCE: An Acronym for Cultivating Presence Before Seeing A Client.**

To aid the process of cultivating presence, there is a helpful acronym, PRESENCE, for cultivating therapeutic presence (Geller & Greenberg, 2012). Spending five minutes, prior to

a session, to walk internally through PRESENCE can help to prepare yourself and the conditions for presence to emerge. A PRESENCE moment involves the following eight steps:

- **Pause** – take a moment to stop from what you are doing
- **Relax** into this moment by taking a deep breath
- **Empty** yourself of judgments, thoughts, distractions, agendas, preconceptions
- **Sense** your inner body, bring awareness to your physical and emotional body
- **Expand** sensory awareness outwards (seeing, listening, touching, sensing what is around you)
- **Notice** what is true in this moment, notice the relationship between what is within you (internal environment) and around you (external environment)
- **Center** and ground (in yourself and your body)
- **Extend** and make contact (with client, or other)

**Box ends here \*\*\*\***

## **Conclusion**

Therapeutic presence involves therapists' being fully in the moment with the client, with the intent or purpose of being of service of a healing process. Research has suggested that presence is essential to effective therapy as well as a preliminary step to Rogers' relationship conditions.

The healing potential of therapeutic presence is enormous, but in today's busy and technology driven life it is very challenging to develop and sustain. Hence, training one's self to be present in life, to work through the obstacles to intimacy and to relational connection, and to sustain a high level of self and relational care is necessary to cultivate this essential therapeutic quality.

## **Points for Reflection** (3-4 questions...see pause moments)

1. How do you practice presence in your own life?
2. What brief practices can you engage in between sessions that will help to cultivate and sustain your presence?
3. What are some of your major challenges or obstacles to being present both within yourself and with others?

## Further Resources

- Therapeutic Presence: A Mindful Approach to Effective Therapy by Shari M. Geller and Leslie Greenberg (2012)
- The Mindful Therapist by Daniel Siegel (2010)
- Mindfulness and the Therapeutic Relationship (2008) Edited by Steven F. Hick and Thomas Bien
- Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future. By P. Senge, C. O. Scharmer, J. Jaworski, & B. S. Flowers. (2004)
- <http://www.sharigeller.ca/articles.htm>

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**Table 1**  
**Items on TPI**

1. I was aware of my own internal flow of experiencing:
- 2. I felt tired or bored:**
- 3. I found it difficult to listen to my client:**
4. The interaction between my client and I felt flowing and rhythmic:
- 5. Time seemed to really drag:**
- 6. I found it difficult to concentrate:**
7. There were moments when I was so immersed with my client's experience that I lost a sense of time and space:
8. I was able to put aside my own demands and worries to be with my client:
- 9. I felt distant or disconnected from my client:**
10. I felt a sense of deep appreciation and respect for my client as a person:
11. I felt alert and attuned to the nuances and subtleties of my client's experience:
12. I was fully in the moment in this session:
- 13. I felt impatient or critical:**
14. My responses were guided by the feelings, words, images, or intuitions that emerged in me from my experience of being with my client:
- 15. I couldn't wait for the session to be over:**
- 16. There were moments when my outward response to my client was different from the way I felt inside:**
17. I felt fully immersed with my client's experience and yet still centered within myself:
- 18. My thoughts sometimes drifted away from what was happening in the moment:**
19. I felt in synchronicity with my client in such a way that allowed me to sense what he/she was experiencing:
20. I felt genuinely interested in my client's experience:
- 21. I felt a distance or emotional barrier between my client and myself:**