

Therapeutic Presence and the Naturopathic Doctor:
Bringing one's whole self into the encounter with the patient

When we are mindful,
Deeply in touch with the present moment,
Our understanding of what is going on deepens,
And we begin to be filled with acceptance, joy, peace and love

-Thich Nhat Hanh

Take a moment to imagine: What would happen if we were not always trying to get on to the next project, the next patient, the next activity? What would happen if we were fully in the moment? In touch with all the subtleties of being here, right now.

This article focuses on being fully present with a patient and how presence can lend itself to a healing encounter. Presence is not only a showing up of body, but a bringing the fullness of one's heart, mind, body, soul, into the encounter with another human being. Therapeutic presence involves being fully in our body, in our own holistic field of knowledge and experience, and bringing this fullness to the patient.

So often we are afraid of the range of experience, emotion, and illness the patient may be bringing to us in a plea for help. We respond from a protective distance or a place of technical responding in way of keeping that, which ails, out of our own reality. As a result we offer the patient only part of what he or she needs in the course of wellness and growth. We offer technique and intervention that is empty of true relating and deep level meeting of you and I.

As a psychologist and Buddhist practitioner, I have learned to value, research and continue to practice and develop the healing aspect of therapeutic presence. Therapeutic presence is a term I have generated and used to reflect the full experience of presence with the intention of being in a healing encounter with and for another human being. In particular, my dissertation research completed for my Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology explores psychotherapist's experience of presence in the therapeutic encounter.

I believe presence is important if not essential for any healing practitioner. Given that naturopathy offers a natural and wholistic approach to helping the patient, the presence of the naturopathic doctor is not only important but an essential quality for genuine helping of the patient. This article is focused on the central aspects of therapeutic presence that emerged from my research and attempts to extend this understanding to the practice of naturopathy. This is a first step in expanding the idea of presence to multiple healing approaches. If we as practitioners can become more present ourselves with the client or patient, we can become more aware and trusting of our own intuition

and knowledge and more responsive to the unique needs of our patients. Becoming present within ourselves also offers a model and experience for the patient to become more present to his or her own experience and bodily wisdom.

What does our experience tell us about presence?

We have all at one time or another had the experience of not being seen or heard by a doctor, therapist, friend or family member when we presented an issue or difficulty that was emerging for us. The therapist or doctor may have responded in a distant, technical, or disregarding manner. This can result in the patient feeling unmet or empty in some way, dissatisfied. Medical, naturopathic and psychological doctors are beginning to also notice that a lack of presence can not only have negative effects for their patients but ultimately for the doctor or therapist's well being.

One of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of being a therapist or naturopathic doctor is to fully show up to the other person. So often we approach people with a safe distance or a quizzical mind trying to figure out best way to help someone. I am sure we have all had those moments of "I don't know how to help this person." On the flipside are the patients that we become over enmeshed with and suddenly take on their symptoms and pains in a sympathetic or over-identifying manner.

Therapeutic presence lies between being too distance and too enmeshed. Therapeutic presence involves being there openly and fully in the moment, in our bodies, with this other person who is seeking help. Taking the other person and all their nuances into our being while maintaining a sense of grounding and centeredness within ourselves.

Presence calls on us to trust the knowledge and body wisdom in ourselves and in our patients. It is a placing aside of cognitive interpretations and quick answers and instead allowing the other's experience to simmer inside ourselves as it interacts with our own experience, intuition, and learned knowledge. From that inner place the right response will emerge, the appropriate intervention. Presence calls on us to have a deep level comfort and trust in the unknown and in our own intuition and knowledge on how to help.

This does not mean throw away the books and realize there is nothing left to learn as it is all in a deeper wisdom place. On the contrary! Study and knowledge is essential. However presence involves a letting go of the specific "X remedy" that helps all people with "Y illness" and allowing this unique individual composed of a particular history, experience, eating habits, emotional and psychological makeup, spirituality to enter our field of knowledge and experience.

General Qualities of Therapeutic presence:

My research study involved interviewing expert therapists on their experience of presence and developing a model of therapeutic presence. This study revealed that the experience of presence has four essential qualities. First, the therapist is fully immersed in the moment with the client. The therapist is absorbed in the depth of experience that is being expressed by the patient and is intensely involved in the present experience of being with the other. Second, the therapist is also in contact with a sense of expansion or spaciousness. While the therapist is feeling the intensity of the details of the in the moment experience, she is also connected to a larger expanse of energy and knowledge. In this place, there is the sense of expansion and feeling that all is okay, that she will not fall apart from the suffering being felt. Third, the therapist also feels grounded and centered within herself. The therapist may feel a merging as she connects to the client's deep inner world, and may feel flooded with the experience of the client's pain, but is also connected to a sense of herself as separate, grounded, and centered. Fourth, the therapist's presence and in the moment experience is guided by the intention of being in service of the client's healing journey. The therapist is not just present for the sake of presence but with the intention of being with and for the client. Therapist's presence takes a certain level of self-development and commitment to presence in the person's own life.

Preparing for Being in Presence with a Patient:

While Presence cannot be assured in a session, we can engage in intentions and processes that prepare the ground for presence to emerge. Two major areas that presence can be helped to cultivate are prior to session and in everyday life.

Prior to a session, or between sessions with patients, naturopathic doctors can enhance their own presence by taking time to clear their selves of personal issues, needs, concerns, judgements and preconceptions so that there is room inside to take inside the depth of the patient's experience. This can involve a moment to be quiet with one's self, and to set the intention to be present and to fully show up with this other person. The intention can be held and revisited during the session as the therapist notices his or her attention wandering off. A simple self-reminder to return to the present moment or an aware breath can be incredibly helpful in this regard. Reviewing past notes can be a way of preparing one's focus to be completely and fully with the person about to be met. As well as simply turning off the phone and creating a positive physical environment for the session to be held. One of the most powerful ways of cultivating presence and coming into the present moment is to breathe. Taking a few breaths prior to session and feeling our feet on the ground can allow us to let go of where we have been, to center ourselves, to expand our own energy, and to open up to the person we are about to meet.

A practice in life is also an important aid in cultivating presence with patients. Understanding and valuing presence in one's own life, with friends, partners, children, also helps to facilitate this quality in our practice. Committing ourselves to our own personal growth and self-development, that is taking care of our own health, issues and personal "business" also allows us to be more present with patients. Daily practice of meditation or breathing, time in nature, and time to connect to our selves are other ways of allowing presence to be there more readily in session. And of course, caring for our bodily needs through eating well, drinking water, nutritional supplements and exercise and creativity are also helpful in becoming more present.

Why is Presence Helpful:

Therapists interviewed talked about feeling more energized after a session where they felt fully present, as well as more present and available to the next person they were engaged with. This can help to prevent burnout as the naturopath is constantly emptying and opening to the present moment which minimizes the burden of carrying the residue of the suffering from the people we see in our daily practice. This heightened energy is enhanced by continuously clearing a space inside before and between each patient.

Therapists' presence also invites the patient to become more present and aware of his or her moment to moment experience. This enhances the patients own healing energy and allows the person to become more familiar with the bodily signals that communicate what is foreign or difficult for the body to process as well as what the body needs for optimum performance. By developing a more personal experience with one's own bodily experience the patient learns to gain greater responsibility for his or her own health.

Therapeutic presence can also allow naturopath doctors to develop awareness and trust of their own intuitions, experience, and knowledge. By gaining a comfort in being with unknown, from a clear inner place, without having to quickly react and respond, we can hear more of what the patient is expressing and have greater access to our own learned knowledge and experience. The internal resonance of the client's experience interacts with our own learned knowledge and emerges in a response that is right for the unique needs of the unique person coming to us for help.

Therapeutic presence can also help provide the naturopathic doctor with information to allow him or her to refer the person to the appropriate source. An example of when to know it is time to refer is when the naturopathic doctor himself or herself feels emotionally overwhelmed or flooded in response to receptively taking in the experience of the patient. With presence, naturopathic doctors can trust their own bodily wisdom

and inner response to the patients' deeply felt and expressed experience, to know how to help and when to refer.

Therapeutic Presence as a Way of Being

My intent with this article is to expand the awareness and practice of naturopathic doctors to power and value of therapeutic presence. While being fully present seems simple and mundane, in actuality it is challenging and profound. Presence can allow us as healing practitioners to bridge the gap between ourselves and our patients, and between the mundane and the sacred. Therapeutic presence can help us to develop and trust our own bodily wisdom and experience to guide us in facilitating the patients recovery as well as help the patient to awaken to his or her own presence and to the healing capacity that exists deeply within their own being.

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