

INTRODUCTION

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

—Maya Angelou (as quoted in Booth & Hachiya, 2004, p. 14)

Thank you for joining me in this dialogue about deepening your therapeutic presence. Together we will explore this positive way of relating for the benefit of others and our own well-being. Over 20 years of reflecting, training, and writing on therapeutic presence have crystallized for me that how we are with clients is more essential than what we do to promote their growth. This is supported by psychotherapy research that has consistently affirmed the relationship as the most consistent predictor of change (Allison & Rossouw, 2013; Norcross, 2011). Yet what contributes to the relationship has been more ethereal. This is changing. A nascent body of research is clarifying that *therapeutic presence* is a necessary and preliminary step to creating safety in our clients and facilitating a strong therapeutic alliance and effective therapy (Dunn, Callahan, Swift, & Ivanovic, 2013; Geller & Greenberg, 2002, 2012; Geller, Greenberg, & Watson, 2010; Hayes & Vinca, 2011; Pos, Geller, & Oghene, 2011). As Maya Angelou eloquently wrote, how we make others feel leaves the most lasting impression.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0000025-001>

A Practical Guide to Cultivating Therapeutic Presence, by S. M. Geller

Copyright © 2017 by the American Psychological Association. All rights reserved.

WHAT IS THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE?

Therapeutic presence is a way of being with your clients that optimizes the doing of therapy. It involves bringing all of yourself to the encounter and being present on multiple levels: physically, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, and relationally. The in-body experience of therapeutic presence includes (a) being grounded and centered in yourself, while (b) feeling deeply immersed in the moment, with (c) a larger sense of expansion or spaciousness. The first three qualities could reflect presence in daily life, such as when you are engrossed in a conversation or watching a sunset. The next quality is what makes it therapeutic: that your presence is with the intention of (d) being compassionately with and for your client, in service of their well-being. Therapeutic presence involves attuning to your clients' experience, and to your personal experience of being with them, moment to moment. It entails an intimacy with others that is highly absorptive and a connection within yourself that is grounded and centered.

Therapeutic presence goes beyond a state of being to evoke a relational process. When you are present with your clients, they can experience feeling met, felt, and understood. This activates a neurophysiological experience of safety, which strengthens the therapeutic relationship and allows for optimal engagement in the work of therapy. There is a reciprocal relationship between your extending yourself with your clients and their feeling your presence, as you both develop greater presence within and between you. A portal opens up to an I–Thou encounter that is larger than each individual (Buber, 1958), also known as therapeutic relational presence (Geller, 2013a; Geller & Greenberg, 2012). Relational presence evokes a sense of connection, and of being seen and seeing, as no other human experience does. It is ultimately this shared presence that leads to therapeutic change.

WHY A BOOK ON CULTIVATING THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE?

Although the value of presence and the therapeutic relationship is not new for us, guidance on how to cultivate and sustain this experience is virtually absent from psychotherapy literature and training. There are many therapy approaches; some are instructional in nature, with steps on what to do with your client. These steps can be difficult to apply clinically without a moment-to-moment attunement to our client. Our clients (like ourselves) are complex human beings with different manners of expression, personalities, issues, and varying needs. Without a foundation on

how to be with and relate to our clients moment to moment, with sensitivity to who they are and their unique experience, prescriptive steps will be less effective. Alternatively, building relationships that are deeply immersed in the present facilitates your clients' natural growth and supports the precise timing of your responses and interventions to align with their readiness.

My hope is that this book will serve as a practical guide to strengthen your therapeutic presence. Together we will explore the skills of presence in the therapy room. Ways of listening, relating, and responding will be illuminated. You will also learn specific breathing, postures, and vocalizations that promote greater calm and connection for both you and your clients. These practices are grounded in neuroscience, particularly Stephen Porges's (2011) polyvagal theory, which teaches us how our prosody (rhythm) of voice, open posture, and breathing patterns can evoke safety in our own body and in others we are with. These phrases (prosody, open posture, breathing patterns—among others) come up repeatedly throughout the book because of how important the physical expressions of presence are to conjuring a sense of safety in your clients and, thus, their openness and engagement in the work of therapy. I will also offer suggestions to create the conditions for presence in your own life, as cultivating presence requires us to care for our personal relationships and our overall well-being.

CULTIVATING PRESENCE IN THE MIND, BODY, AND BRAIN

The perspective offered in this book honors the integrated nature of body, mind, brain, and relationships and the vital role they play in our therapeutic process. This view reflects a fusion of humanistic–experiential principles, Eastern perspectives, and neuroscience. In humanistic–experiential perspectives, we first need to be in touch with our emotions and ongoing flow of experience as felt in the body (Gendlin, 1978; Greenberg, 2007, 2010; Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott, 1993; Perls, 1970; Rogers, 1980). In this way, the mind and emotions are embodied: Emotions involve bodily changes that have a strong effect on our thoughts and behaviors (Damasio, 1999, 2005; Greenberg, 2010; Niedenthal, 2007). Current perspectives in psychology are beginning to recognize the concept of embodiment that is central to this view, that the body has a major influence on the mind and psychological processes (Glenberg, 2010; Siegel, 2010, 2011; Tschacher & Bergomi, 2011). This is aligned with Eastern perspectives such as traditional Chinese medicine, where mind and the brain are viewed as living in the heart (Yu,

2009). Neuroscience is providing emerging support for the interconnection of mind, body, and relationships (Porges, 2011; Schore, 2009, 2012; Siegel, 2010, 2011).

Presence is an embodied experience, and we need to access presence in the body if we wish to influence our mental states. A lot of the practices are therefore designed to increase connection with your body, so that you can take the necessary steps to regain presence when needed. For example, noticing when we are slumped or when our body or facial muscles are tense can inform us that we may be emotionally reactive or shut down. By taking deep exhalations and relaxing our body posture, we can be aware of our disconnection, calm ourselves, and reconnect with the present moment.

This perspective also holds that we are relational. We are interconnected with others, and therefore we are constantly influencing each other through our mental and emotional states. This can be intentional in a positive direction. If I am calm and grounded, my clients' nervous system can entrain with mine, and they too become calmed. The opposite is also true—my agitation or distraction can cause my client to shut down. With awareness, we can shift our bodily state so we are less thrown by our clients' emotional states. For example, I can ground myself in the present while sensing my clients' emotional world, to keep myself steady and to evoke a relational environment for my clients so they can be calm. Presence can therefore be evoked through harmony in the body, as well as in harmonious and safe relationships. This book holds the view that body, brain, and relationships are intertwined, with the body being a portal through which we can access and express our presence.

WHY INCLUDE NEUROSCIENCE IN A PSYCHOTHERAPY BOOK?

This book draws on current neuroscience research to illuminate how the practices offered can enhance therapeutic presence. Current neuroscience is validating what humanistic perspectives and Eastern philosophies have said for many years, providing a glimpse of the profound impact we have on others at the levels of brain and body (Geller & Porges, 2014; Porges, 2011; Schore, 2009, 2012; Siegel, 2010, 2011). Understanding the neurophysiological process of presence in ourselves, with clients and in relationships, helps us fine-tune our therapy and relational skills so that we can activate states of safety, growth, and healing. It assists us as we look after our own physiology as therapists. It also supports our creative and flexible use of the appropriate technique in response to what is alive in the moment.

You may intuitively know how to adjust your vocal tone with a client when she or he is in distress or convey a message with your body that you are harmless. Grounding your technique in neuroscience theory can help you link new concepts and familiar experiences in a way that binds your approach into a more cohesive whole, from which a deeper understanding can emerge. For example, I am more inclined to breathe in rhythm with my client's breath (a process I refer to later in this book as *entrainment breathing*) when I understand how it invites a greater read of my client's experience and invites her or his body to settle in connection with mine. It also motivates me to practice (both in life and in session) so I can become more adept at cultivating and using my presence to evoke safety and connection. We fuel our commitment to practice when we understand what is happening when we are present and the potential for good that comes with it.

The new insights that come from creating dialogue across different perspectives speak to the importance of an interdisciplinary approach. If we view presence from only one perspective, we limit our access to its richness. Engaging dialogue across perspectives helps to maintain a broad focus and understanding of the process of change.

This book includes some basics on the brain as they relate to psychotherapy that will also help keep you current. It is possible that your clients are reading popular sources that reference the brain, so grounding the therapeutic process in neuroscience can provide you with a language to talk to your clients about the fullness of their experience. It can also help them engage more deeply in their own growth process. The science lends legitimacy to interventions some clients may otherwise dismiss. The recent spark in mindfulness research and practice is a testament to this.

Although I find neuroscience exciting, I recognize that not everyone may see the value in knowing what is happening at the neuronal level during the therapy process, and that sometimes encountering new ways of conceptualizing experiences can be uncomfortable. However, I believe that this information is essential to the optimal practice of therapeutic presence. Know that it takes time and repetition to really absorb content that is of a different realm than we may be used to. I have gone into detail in Chapter 3 to provide a primer on the brain in relation to presence. In later chapters I then link some of the material back to the brain to invite an understanding of how certain practices can activate processes in the brain and body. This purposeful repetition occurs so you can connect experiential and conceptual perspectives during practical application. It also provides you with more exposure to the most important material, to help you encode the information in long-term memory. With practice, you may

discover that these techniques feel as organic to the healing process as I believe them to be.

A PARADIGM SHIFT: FROM DOING TO BEING

To really cultivate the quality of relating that I am proposing, we need to become comfortable with slowing down to be present within ourselves and in our relationships. We are a society that reveres being busy, achieving through following particular steps, and being independent. This view can infiltrate the therapy setting through prescriptive approaches that over-emphasize stepwise efficiency, filling time with tasks, and being independently masterful at technique. Rather than measuring effectiveness as how much we do and how quickly we do it, and rigidly adhering to a series of steps, we need to focus on our interdependent nature and the value of flexibly discovering what is not yet known through opening to the moment. This requires a value shift from prioritizing doing to focusing on being, to bring greater presence and a different kind of attention to what we do. This aligns with the habits of highly effective people who emphasize slowing down, setting limits, living a balanced life, being flexible, and working with others instead of alone (Covey, 2004).

Another misconception from society that may subtly impact therapists is that to be effective with others we need to learn to influence them. In fact, presence is often misconstrued as charisma. Although our urge to help may reflect our wanting our clients to feel better, be happier, and live more meaningful lives, it can also reflect our own desire to feel masterful in bringing about these outcomes. Overvaluing influence undermines the goals of therapy. Relating effectively requires us to see ourselves as a facilitator and partner with our clients in their growth, rather than as an authority on their lives. My students in training have viewed this shift in perspective as a relief. To put aside the pressure to be an authority on their client, rather than respond to this basic human need to be heard, as only when clients feel felt and understood can change even be possible.

Focusing on presence also means shifting from traditional ways of knowing (thinking and analysis) to knowing through sensing and feeling, then allowing our cognition to emerge from that place of subjectively and relationally being in the moment. To do this, we must know our inner world intimately, as we are interconnected with others. This requires building capacity and competency in being with and knowing your subjective world and in being relationally present, while being able to shift back and forth between what we have objectively learned as professionals and what we are subjectively sensing in the moment.

This paradigm shift also invites us to see being efficient and effective as encompassing taking care of ourselves, working together in communities, and nourishing our personal relationships. It asks us to listen deeply to what we need to feel healthy and whole. This might mean taking time to work through the issues that keep us from being more connected in our relationships and to reflect on how to better align our values with our actions.

Relating with presence is very difficult in a world where we are flooded with distractions, all vying for our attention. Technology and e-mail demands, along with pressure to produce outcomes quickly, have compromised our basic ability to slow down and have a healthy relationship with others and ourselves. Yet we can slow down, with conscious attention and practice. And the paradox is that in slowing down we can often become more productive and efficient than when we are living by the rules of a fast-paced, achievement-focused world, because we are less burnt out, are more joyful, and feel healthier and more supported.

This book is therefore not as much about what we do, as how we do it. It is about approaching our clients in a state that is open and ready to receive, clear of an agenda, so we are able to relate intimately and engage fully with their inner world. It is a shift from a paradigm of independence to one of interdependence, from prescriptive practice to collaboration, and from care of others to including care for ourselves.

VISION FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY TRAINING

Part of this paradigm shift invites psychotherapy training across traditions to include foundational training in cultivating therapeutic presence and promoting positive therapeutic relationships. Currently, most training programs guide students in intervention and techniques, with little guidance on how to be when offering these tasks. They may talk about the importance of presence and therapeutic relationships, yet without a focus on cultivating these skills. I am not minimizing the value of interventions. I am suggesting that an inclusion of cultivating presence and personal and relational growth should be of equal importance. This book can serve as a resource and manual, and in the final chapter I provide some further suggestions for training.

Presence is trainable, as evidenced by several years of workshops in which I have seen people shift from rigid ways of relating to responding with fluidity and flexibility in the moment. Their ability to engage with presence improved with sustained commitment to practice. The brain itself changes to a healthier state when people are present in relationship (Schor, 2009,

2012; Siegel, 2011). Practice in presence enhances brain, body, and relational integration (Hanson & Mendius, 2010; Siegel, 2010), which means you can develop greater access to the presence experience in session.

In the chapters to follow, we learn a lot more about how the mind, brain, and body contribute to the experience of presence, but here's a taste: Mindfulness training, which is a fundamental practice in cultivating therapeutic presence, helps to balance the nervous system and can foster the ability to feel or take in the depth of the client's pain with greater intimacy and less reactivity (Baldini, Parker, Nelson, & Siegel, 2014; Escuriex & Labbé, 2011; Hanson & Mendius, 2009). I propose that training also needs to include relational practices (e.g., group drumming, relational mindfulness) to explore how we can be open and intimate in relating with our clients, while remaining in contact with our own experience. This simultaneous connection to self and others is the foundation for relating with presence.

If the relationship is the foundation of good therapy, and presence the foundation of a good relationship, we must teach future clinicians the art of being present within and with others. It is essential to balance the doing mode of therapy with the being mode, for greatest efficacy in our client's healing. This book will equip therapists with the tools to provide a more complete therapeutic experience and optimal conditions for their clients' growth.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book picks up where my previous book coauthored with Leslie Greenberg leaves off. Our previous book, *Therapeutic Presence: A Mindful Approach to Effective Therapy*, focused mostly on the theory of therapeutic presence (with some practices woven in), to help understand the richness of the therapeutic presence model from a knowledge-based perspective (Geller & Greenberg, 2012). The current book moves from theory to practice to evoke an experiential and neurophysiological understanding of presence, both in relationship with clients in session and in your life. I have written in a conversational style so that you and I can explore the practices and skills of presence, not just as distant concepts but also as direct experiences. I have also incorporated vignettes¹ to illuminate the concepts in examples that are relatable.

¹Any references to clients in the vignettes or any other clinical material in this book have been disguised to protect client confidentiality.

Part I does infuse this personal approach with theory so that you can obtain some grounding in therapeutic presence even if you have not read the first book. Chapter 1 focuses on an introduction to the concept of presence in therapy, including discerning it from other therapeutic concepts such as mindfulness, listening, and countertransference. Chapter 2 provides a background on how experiences akin to presence have been viewed in different theoretical approaches over time. Chapter 3 provides current neuroscience understanding and background of therapeutic presence, as it is the platform on which many of the practices and skills are built.

The focus of Part II is more directly clinical, helping you develop the skill of presence in session. Chapter 4 provides guidance on creating the conditions for therapeutic presence before a session, so you arrive at the encounter with a sense of presence in yourself, clear of agenda and preconceptions. Chapters 5 and 6 are both focused on presence in session itself. Chapter 5 explores how to receive your client from that place of openness you have fostered, including reading the moment-to-moment experience of your client and attuning to how this is experienced within yourself. Chapter 6 teaches how to skillfully respond to your client from the information you have received. This includes promoting contact non-verbally with your client to foster safety, using neurophysiological practices and principles such as entrainment and resonance. Chapter 7 discusses the challenges you might face in being therapeutically present, with some suggestions for overcoming them.

Once you have a sense of the clinical importance of presence and how to skillfully facilitate therapy with presence, we focus on strengthening your personal presence in your daily life. Being adept in therapeutic presence goes beyond what you do in the therapy encounter to how you live day to day.

Part III is brimming with in-life practices. The chapters are designed around an empirically validated model of therapeutic presence (Geller & Greenberg, 2002). Many practices are described in detail, so you can follow them easily and also use them to facilitate the cultivation of presence in others (e.g., students, trainees). Practices for daily life are first described in Chapter 8 with mindfulness and experiential exercises. Chapter 9 explores practices you can engage in your life to boost particular aspects of the process of therapeutic presence, such as receptivity, inward attuning, and extending and contact. Chapter 10 invites you to foster the in-body qualities of the experience of presence: grounding, immersion, expansion, and being with and for the other.

Part IV is focused on the integration of in-life presence with therapeutic presence to reach an even deeper relational connection. Chapter 11 provides a glimpse at therapeutic relational presence, which is a larger and more expansive experience of connection reflecting the spiritual domain as viewed

through the relationship. Finally, Chapter 12 pulls together the learning from this book as well as suggest future directions.

Appendix A provides you with resources, tools, and smartphone applications to help cultivate presence in your life and relationships. Appendices B and C include markers for therapists' presence and clients' safety. Appendix D offers you a model for optimizing your therapy session with therapeutic presence.

How To Use This Book

This book is ideal if you are an experienced therapist looking for a renewal of your therapy practice and your life. It can also be a valuable resource for novice therapists and/or as a practical guide if you are a trainer, so that you can guide your students in cultivating this foundational approach as a part of your training program.

I encourage you to explore the practices offered throughout this book directly so that you can get a feel for the process of and challenges to cultivating this in-the-moment state of being. Practicing presence involves both informal practice in your daily life and formal intentional practices. I recommend you set aside a time each day (20–30 minutes) for intentional presence practice and self-care. To embody presence requires time to immerse yourself in the sensory experiences of the moment. To support this I further recommend going on a retreat or taking a workshop that is focused on cultivating presence, such as through individually or relationally based mindfulness (see Chapter 12 and Appendix A for suggestions). To support the value of self-care and a renewed sense of well-being, you will be encouraged to attend to stress, unresolved issues, and any personal challenges to experiencing the type of intimacy that presence entails.

Throughout the book I offer different practices to evoke various aspects of therapeutic presence. However, the benefits of some are overlapping. The different styles of practices offered are an invitation for you to notice what you personally may gravitate to, as I believe it is more likely you will put into place that which you are naturally inclined toward. Explore them all to see what is the right fit for you.

I encourage you to take several pauses throughout this book, to allow the concepts and practices to infuse into your body and experience. To support this, each chapter begins with an image and a quote. The majority of the images were created by mindfulness-based psychiatrist M. Lee Freedman² through a practice of presence, where one uses the camera as an opportunity to fully sense the experience in the moment, including the relationship with

²Where noted, photographs are used with permission from M. Lee Freedman. Copyright ©2016 by M. Lee Freedman.

the subject. These images are designed to evoke a feeling of the subject of the chapter before you immerse yourself in descriptive words.

I encourage you to linger with the photo and quote before absorbing the chapter content, to activate a felt experience of the topic. Read the quote while taking a few full breaths, sensing the feeling of the words in your body. Then allow yourself to sense the image just as you experience it, noticing the feeling evoked in your body as you zoom in on an aspect of the image and then widen your focus to take in the whole. Attention to your sensory world using the image and quote can help to activate a right-brain felt experience processing of information. This will complement your left-brain rational understanding so that over time these different ways of processing can come together and you can experience the material from a more integrated internal state. This is also true of the practices within the chapters.

Transition Practices

To further support the absorption of material and to open more fully to the moment, each chapter closes with an opportunity to pause for a brief breath awareness practice. Pausing with a compassionate awareness is the hallmark of presence. It allows us to notice what we are experiencing, to clear ourselves inside of the remains of where we have just been, and to enter into the next moment with a more open and present stance. This helps us to fully experience what comes next without the overload or distraction of what came before. Practicing mindful transitions is especially important when transitioning between sessions to help you release any emotional residue following a session and to enter into the next one feeling clear, open, and present. The practices are of course optional, so choose what you feel curious about engaging in, knowing they are here for you if you choose to strengthen your experience of presence.

There is no better time to start cultivating presence than now. Enjoy this brief mindful breathing practice as a way of pausing and beginning to explore your breath as an anchor to the present moment. It is designed to help you be in touch with the here and now of your body and to use your breath as an anchor into the moment, which are central components of cultivating presence.

TRANSITION PRACTICE: FEELING THE RHYTHM OF YOUR BREATH

- Pause and invite your awareness into this moment by bringing your attention to your breath.

- Rest your hand on your belly to physically connect to your inhale and exhale.
- Feel the rise and fall of your hand on your belly in rhythm with your inhale and exhale.
- Take a few full breaths while noticing the sensations of your breathing.
- When you are ready, return your attention to reading or to the next phase of your day.