



# Being there

What does presence have to offer the supervisory relationship? asks **Zoë Chouliara**

I am curious about the concept of presence. Presence is now widely accepted as an integral part of the therapeutic relationship. Less is known, however, about presence in the supervisory relationship. In this article, my aim is, first, to summarise current knowledge on presence, especially in the therapeutic relationship, and second, to highlight and reflect on the importance of supervisory presence, with reference to my own practice.

Presence was first described as a phenomenon by Carl Rogers in 1986.<sup>1</sup> He saw it as 'one more characteristic' of the therapeutic relationship, yet at the core of his therapeutic work. 'When I am at my best... closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness in the relationship, then whatever I do seems full of healing. Then simply my presence is releasing and helpful.'<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting on the above quote, Sanders<sup>3</sup> commented that Rogers' thoughts have

been interpreted in a number of different ways. They were seen by some as evidence of a spiritual connection between counsellor and client, and by others as an additional quality, or even an additional therapeutic condition. Presence can also be taken to be a kind of momentary 'super psychological contact'. Similarities with the concept of relational depth, which is more systematically articulated by Mearns and Cooper,<sup>4</sup> could also be drawn. They argue that presence and trust are more or less part of, or preconditions for, 'relational depth' experiences.

## Skill versus presence?

In the 1990s, Osterman and Schwartz-Barcott<sup>5</sup> developed and published a model of presence rooted in nursing, rather than counselling practice. Although this was not a therapeutic model as such, it is strongly relational and highly clinically applicable. According to Osterman and Schwartz-Barcott, there are four aspects of presence:

- 1** Physical presence (also known as light presence), including contact with other (superficial small talk), settling into the room/chairs, awareness of own body
- 2** Psychological presence (partial presence), including hearing the story, checking in, listening, attending, attunement, caring, openness, and interest
- 3** Emotional presence (with and for the other), including understanding, compassion, acceptance, unconditional positive regard, responding or providing intervention or empathic response in resonance to what the client is sharing, transpersonal presence (presence with spirit), and contact with deeper intuition
- 4** Relational therapeutic presence (all the levels), including mutual contact as the goal, and vacillating (dancing) between what is needed in the moment of deep contact with self, with the client, and with a deeper intuition.

## Self and spirituality

Therapists (unavoidably and thankfully) bring their personal qualities into the therapeutic work. This is often referred to in the literature as 'use of self'. Presence is part of the therapist's use of self in a therapeutic and multidimensional way. However, the model of evidence-based practice, the grading of evidence and NICE guidelines as the gold standard of practice, leave limited space in formal training and practice for presence. This is despite strong evidence for the pre-eminence of the therapeutic relationship over the theoretical model in relation to the effectiveness of therapy.<sup>6</sup>

There is the question of whether presence is a skill that can be taught. According to Geller and colleagues, who have done the bulk of work in this area, therapeutic presence is '... more than the sum of its parts. It is more than just being congruent, more than just being real, more than just being accepting of the client, more than being empathic, or attuned or responsive. It is a complex interplay of therapeutic skills and [the therapist's] underlying intention of fully being in the moment and meeting that experience with the depth of one's being'.<sup>7</sup>

Therapists' intention and ability to be present with their clients provides an invitation to the other to feel met and understood. It is an offer to stay open and



become present within their own experience, as well as in the interactions with their therapist. Thus, presence has often been linked to relational depth because it allows for moments of deep connection.

### **Grounded, immersed and expanded**

Geller and Greenberg have identified the components of presence.<sup>8</sup> According to them, therapeutic presence involves being in contact with one's integrated and healthy self while being open and receptive to what is poignant in the moment, and immersed in it, with a larger sense of spaciousness and expansion of awareness and perception. This grounded, immersed and expanded awareness occurs with the intention of being with and for the client, in service of their healing process.

The authors conducted a study with experienced therapists, who were proponents or had written about presence and its importance in psychotherapy. Based on a qualitative analysis of therapists' reports, a working model of therapeutic presence was developed. The model included three emergent domains: first, preparing the ground for presence, referring to the pre-session and general life preparation for therapeutic presence; second, the process of presence, such as the processes or activities the person is engaged in when being therapeutically present; third, the actual in-session experience of presence. According to Geller and Greenberg, presence is the foundation of Rogers' basic conditions of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard and is the overarching condition that allows them to be expressed.

### **The supervisory relationship**

We would expect that much of this knowledge about presence in the therapeutic relationship could be applied to supervision. However, according to Mullaly,<sup>9</sup> presence and power within the supervisory relationship are not often reflected on, acknowledged or openly addressed. They do, however, exist and influence the individuals involved in both a conscious and a subconscious way. Mullaly found that the existence of these dynamics can affect the processes of communication, vulnerability and transparency, which in turn can determine the depth of the trusting

relationship and consequently affect the supervisory experience and benefit. While this research originates from pastoral work, rather than counselling or psychotherapy, given the overlap, the learnings can be highly relevant. Mullaly raises the key role of presence in regulating the power dynamic in the supervisory relationship. This is understandable, given that being fully present and congruent in the relationship can minimise overpowering and facilitate congruence and authenticity, as suggested by Natiello.<sup>10</sup>

McMahon<sup>11</sup> has identified four guiding principles for supervisors' engagement with supervisees. Presence features among those principles. The principles are: offering emotional presence and sensitivity; valuing both vulnerability and competence; offering knowledge and experience with humility, and developing a relationship to support continued personal and professional growth. According to McMahon, supervisors need both sensitivity and courage while engaging with supervisees' personal and professional personas and their vulnerability and competence, in order to support the development of personally grounded, humble but confident practitioners.

The links between presence and getting in touch with and accepting vulnerability, as identified both by Mullaly and McMahon, are of great interest in supervision. This is especially so as being in touch and in peace with your own vulnerability as a supervisor could potentially help identify parallel processes.<sup>12</sup> In addition, it is bound to give permission to the supervisee to accept and integrate their own vulnerability. This, in turn, is key to organismic change and growth on self-level in clients. This is achieved by lowering defences and allowing integration of experience to self.

*'What you may lack in skill, you can make up for with presence. Skill without presence is not only ineffective but can also be risky and non-therapeutic'*

### **Reflections**

One of the main challenges I encountered in my own therapeutic training was to transition from an attitude that 'skill is everything' to the person-centred stance that 'being' is more important than 'doing', or - even more accurately - that being is the ultimate skill. I happen to disagree with Geller that presence cannot replace skill. I actually believe that what you may lack in skill, you can certainly make up for with presence. I think skill without presence is not only ineffective but can also be risky and non-therapeutic. My exposure to 'action work' through my supervisory training has challenged my stance and definition of skill, to a large extent. In my limited experience, action work seems to demand skill and presence in equal measures. It tends to deepen empathy quickly and require congruence - in other words, it demands an authentic presence.

When I started my supervisory practice eight years ago, I became even more aware of the importance of the use of self, especially because of the multiple levels at which we have to work in supervision, and therefore the higher chance of encountering multiple parallel processes. I also became more in touch with the developmental element of supervising trainees.<sup>13</sup> Through my supervisees' development, I could see more clearly and reflect on my own journey through my training, practice and supervisory practice. The choice of this topic therefore reflects and is part of this ongoing process.

### **Going into spirals**

Essentially, to me, the issue of presence comes down to the issue of connecting with the self. Therefore, I would like to bring this article to a close by briefly presenting a recent session with a supervisee, Clara.\* I had been working with Clara for many years and we had built a strong supervisory relationship. She was in the final year of her training and wanted to discuss a difficulty she had with 'being present'. I commented that my experience of her in the supervisory relationship was the opposite. She clarified that she felt she was fully present in supervision, but she sometimes could not be present in her therapeutic work. We moved into action to explore this further by using pebbles/seashells.



Clara chose a round seashell with a big hole in the middle to concretise her struggle with being present with clients. She said she felt as if she was there but she was 'brittle', as if 'clients' words were going through and out of her'. I asked her to choose another stone to represent what stopped her from being present. She chose a 'spiky' seashell. She said that this represented her critical self, who judged herself harshly. She remembered that, when she was younger, she was more edgy, more argumentative, more forceful in her presence, a bit like the shell. She pointed to the hole, saying that the hole was still there, despite the spiky exterior, thus highlighting an incongruence in that way of being.

She also chose another seashell, smoother and with a smaller hole. This represented her more sensitive side, which was more able to receive, despite feeling vulnerable. We discussed these two sides in her, these two configurations, and how they could be conflicting at times and obstruct her presence. She realised that the conflict between these two sides of her were 'making an awful lot of noise'.

In an attempt to help the transition from fragmentation to integration, I asked Clara what she would bring in to represent a more integrated presence - in other words, how her integrated self would look. She brought in a big, glass, heart-shaped object. She said that, if she was integrated, she would be transparent and 'work from a heart place'. She continued and brought in a small, colourful, smooth, egg-shaped object. She said that if she was working from the heart, she would 'roll' happily, 'following the clients'. She would find balance no matter what, because she would feel in touch with herself, connected and flexible. She also chose a big, shiny, mother-of-pearl-like shell, shaped like a big snail, to represent our supervisory relationship. She felt that, although we often 'went into spirals', we always got where we needed to go. She felt held in the supervisory relationship, yet allowed to go and explore her spirals. I asked her if she needed to change anything in our supervisory relationship to make it more supportive of her quest for integration and presence. She said she didn't need anything to change in supervision at the time.

I wondered first of all whether Clara's feeling of not being present extended into

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our supervisory relationship. Could it be that I was not present with Clara in our sessions or even with other students? However, her concretisation of our work dissolved these concerns. I also thought of my journey through supervision and therapeutic work, and I can now see clearly that it is a process of moving from fragmentation to integration. In other words, it is a process of reclaiming all the different aspects of me, holding them and integrating them in my work. And the more I do this, the more therapeutic I am, but also the more whole I am. I also realise that this is a work in progress and that, in this process, there are forward and backward steps. And this mirrors exactly the process the clients and supervisees go through, which is not necessarily linear but dynamic, as is everything human.

The supervisory relationship is an integral component in almost all supervision orientations, although important differences exist in quality, function and stance. Presence seems to be an important factor in both the therapeutic and the supervisory relationship. It appears that the more comfortable we are to grapple with the interplay between self and experience, the more present we will be as therapists and supervisors. Accepting and embracing our own vulnerability gives permission to others to do the same and helps remove the obstacles to being present. ■

\* Clara's name and identifying details have been changed.

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