

From Psychology Today Musings on Empathy

Pain is not the issue; being alone with it is

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"The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle...." - Simone Weil

An astonishing paradox I witness regularly is how, time and again, we long for others' presence when we are suffering, and yet when others are suffering we reassure, offer advice, change the topic awkwardly, comfort, sympathize, offer our own experiences - anything but bringing our presence. How can we meet those moments with more presence and be in empathic connection with the other person?

Pure Presence

The first step, perhaps, is to release ourselves from the idea that we have to say something. Presence is wordless. It's about making our being available to be with another person's experience instead of being focused on our own. I imagine, if we manage to work through the challenges of our current times and survive as a species, that a time may come when we will have language to describe what presence looks like. For now, all I know is there is a high correlation between one person's listening presence and the other person's sense of not being alone, and this is communicated without words. We can be present with someone whose language we don't understand, who speaks about circumstances we have never experienced, or whose reactions are baffling to us. It's a soul orientation and intentionality to simply be with another. Presence, in this sense, is a sacred act for me.

Sometimes getting there is hard, because the content of what the person says is charged for us, or because we are involved and we want a particular outcome or action to take place, or because we are uncomfortable being in the vicinity of strong emotions, especially ones of pain or sorrow of any kind. Whatever our reaction, if we can open to it with tenderness we greatly increase the chances of success in putting our attention on another person. I experience it as a way of caring for myself, honoring my reaction, letting myself know that I take my experience seriously and want to attend to it. Once I do that, I feel empowered and free when I am then able to choose where I put my attention instead of being at the mercy of my own reactions. I become bigger as a human being, more available to life.

Letting Ourselves Be Moved

Often enough even when we become present we are not fully present because we still engage in some kind of mental process of trying to figure out how to respond. At other times we may protect ourselves, keeping some separation or distance with the other person.

Full empathic presence includes the breaking open of our heart to take in another's humanity. Our imagination can help, too, the simple and famous exercise of trying to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. We listen to their words and their story, and allow ourselves to be affected by the experience of what it would be like.

Then we understand. Empathic understanding is different from empathic presence. We can have presence across any barrier, and it's still a gift. If we also understand, even without saying anything, I believe the other person's sense of being heard increases, and they are even less alone with the weight of their experience.

Allowing into our heart the other person's suffering doesn't mean we suffer with them, because that means shifting the focus of our attention to our own experience. Rather, it means that we recognize the experience as fully human, and behold the beauty of it, in all its aspects, even when difficult, painful, or upsetting. Pain is not the issue; it's being alone with pain that has such devastating consequences. I want to do all I can, in the presence of suffering of any kind, to leave people knowing that I am with them, that they are not alone to hold their pain. I trust that this is the most significant gift I can offer - my own full heart and presence.

Empathic Words

Many times my attempt to be with another's experience is dramatically enhanced by finding words to convey my understanding and my care. In many situations being able to provide an empathic reflection of what we hear increases the togetherness that a person may experience, gives them more trust of being understood.

I want my words to emerge from the ground of presence and understanding which I occupy, free and pure. Searching for words takes any of us out of presence. The most perfect words without the heart of my presence will never do the trick. There is simply no substitute for the fullness of my own humanity to reach another's and to give us the mystery and magic of being together.

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