

Service, Support and Success

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The Art of Holding Space

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In early spring my daughter brought home a bucket of dirt from school. It was part of some school project about watching plants grow. She told me what she had planted in the dirt, and that she wanted to keep it on the kitchen table to watch it grow. I was excited for her and fully committed to helping her with this project.

After a few days of staring at the damp soil, I noticed something green poking its head into this world. We watched this little plant grow each day, measuring it and wondering what it would look like.

As time passed, we realized the tiny plant had a little problem; it had failed to shed the husk of its seed. The dry shell of the seed, where it came from, covered one of the leaves of the green sprout. As it grew taller, the shell was certainly getting in the way of its growth.

I wanted to pull it off, touching it a few times. I knew that there were two options. One, I pull the seed off but would risk pulling the entire plant out of the soil, or I would risk pulling the leaf off and potentially killing the plant. I might help the plant grow but was almost certain that I might hurt the plant in the process.

Two, I could do nothing and watch and hope that it would work itself out. I could watch it and wait until the shell was so loose that pulling it off posed no risk to the growing plant.

So I held space for this little plant.

It's Not Nothing

I chose to do nothing. Well not exactly nothing. I observed and waited for the right time to help this little plant out. I did not rush or force my help on the plant; I waited and let the plant figure out how to shake off the shell by itself.

I knew that by removing the seed shell I would risk damaging the plant, even though the shell was stunting its growth. I knew that the risk of interfering was probably greater than the risk of observing and waiting.

It was challenging because I desperately wanted to pull off that seed shell every time I saw it.

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Staring at the struggling plant, I suddenly realized it was still growing; in spite of the husk, it was finding a way to grow. I realized that this is exactly what I do at work every day.

As a direct support professional, I am always challenged with wanting to step in and do something for someone I support. I see them struggling with a task, and I immediately want to make it easier for them. I want to feel needed and do a good job.

A Better Choice

However, I have learned over my career that doing tasks for others is not always the best option. Sometimes doing less is helping out more.

If we do everything for someone, then that individual never learns how to do anything for themselves. The absence of failure and struggle are great losses in a person's life.

I have worked with people who are very capable of achieving high levels of independence but are deeply unpracticed and unskilled at doing anything on their own. Unfortunately, they have had someone step in and do tasks for them for most of their lives, leaving them no chance to learn how to do it themselves.

I have also supported people who have been taught how to do tasks and have been given the space to learn how to do them. These people are often much more capable at many tasks, often blowing conventional expectations out of the water.

Tips and Techniques

1. Holding space is not an exact science. There are no do's and do not's, this is an art form. It is ever changing and always a learning experience. Every situation is unique and requires constant practice, as well as the openness to change in any moment.
2. Breathing is your best friend. Taking a deep breath before entering any situation, no matter how desperately your attentiveness is required, will give you and your brain time to process and react as needed. Overreaction often occurs when we do not take our time but jump in on our instinct and not intentional action.
3. Trust the process. Learning takes time. It takes you time to learn anything in life. The same goes for the people you support. Helping someone learn about money and budgeting can take a lot of ups and downs to learn the right balance. Allowing people to learn how to succeed and safely fail at spending habits will allow them to grow into their own financial independence. Create a safe space for them to fail and allow them to learn from their failure.
4. Create a safe space. Safety is key to holding space. Make sure that safety is a focus. You might appear to be doing little but you might be scanning and observing for the risk of an unsafe situation.
5. Less is more. Doing less is often doing more. It is tough to sit back and watch people learn, struggle or fail at something you can do for them but, in the long run, allowing that

safe space for people to learn, as you most likely have had, gives them the dignity to figure it out.

6. Be the shadow. Creating little opportunities for success is part of holding space. Set up the situation for the greatest chance of success without doing the hard lifting for the person you are supporting. If the person you are supporting gets overwhelmed when folding their laundry, try sorting it out for them first and then allow them the positive experience of learning how to fold it. Break down the parts into bite-sized pieces without doing the chewing.
7. Be the designer of success. Learn to be the person who makes something possible. When it comes to the big goals of community living, knowing that a person is overwhelmed by crowds, set them up for success by ensuring that they learn to do their shopping, or their recreating at non-peak times. Let them learn in their own way in spaces where skill development is the only thing they need to focus on. Holding space means knowing what spaces are most welcoming and creating a safe space for success to happen.
8. Ask yourself the tough questions. Is this better for me or for the person I am supporting? Does this activity or support offer me an easier day or does it offer the person I am supporting an easier day? Is this for management or is it for the people I support? Does this create independence or dependence?
9. Find peace in the awkward moments. Often interference happens when someone feels awkward. You might see someone struggling doing an activity and you feel sorry for them, or you feel an empathetic cringe in your heart and want to step in and do it for them. Breathe, and take time to allow that awkwardness to work itself out.
10. Less can be less. Holding space is about doing the most you can with the least amount of intervention. Doing absolutely nothing to help another will not provide the greatest and healthiest level of care. Knowing when to step in and when to step back takes practice.
11. Be kind to yourself. You will step in too early and you will step in too late. You will intervene when you realize that you could have waited, and you will wait too long and miss the golden opportunity to step in. Learn from these experiences and improve your instincts by being accepting of the ever-changing nature of holding space.
12. All roads lead to Rome, but there are so many ways to get there. Allow the people you support to learn how to do it their way. Give space in their learning. It will often not be the way you have learned or even the choices you might make, but it is their way.

Holding space is the art of knowing when to step in and help and when to let the shell sit on the plant. It is knowing when not to pull hard or to force yourself into a situation, when to let someone struggle and, yes, even sometimes fail.

A healthy individual has the right to fail and the right to a healthy amount of stress. Taking those opportunities away from individuals can slow their growth and their ability to integrate and achieve their fullest life.

If a person never learns how to tend to their own needs, they will always need others to do what they are capable of with some practice.

In Summary

We watched our plant grow and, in time, it pushed that shell out and off its leaf. All we did was water it and give it a well-lit corner of the table. I made sure it had the ingredients to succeed. It has grown into a ten-foot vine of flowering glory in our back yard.

What if I had interfered and taken that shell off early?

Did I do anything at all?

Holding space for another person is being at peace with watching someone struggle. Not laughing at their struggles or feeling sorry for them, but being fully present and compassionate to the struggle of life we all must learn to endure.

Holding space is supporting people by teaching tools of how to deal with success and failure, not eliminating failure from a person's life all together.

It can be challenging at times to know when to step in and help, or when to let someone figure it out themselves. This is the art of the practice of holding space.

I have struggled with the question for my value at work. I am being paid to help another person, so how can I justify doing less?

If the answer is wrong change the question. Instead of saying I am being paid to help, I tell myself that I am being paid to help someone be more independent.

I am constantly observing, learning and changing how I support others. It depends on so many factors that change from moment to moment. I observe the environment, the history, the individual and my own self.

I make my decision of when to involve myself based on what is best for the person I am supporting.

I take my time and move slowly. Supporting another person in their daily lives is a delicate endeavor. Taking time to allow the information to process and unfold has given me a great deal of success in learning the art of holding space.

As the plant grows tall in our yard, I realize that it has no idea that I did nothing and learned so much from doing nothing. Doing nothing can be very challenging sometimes. I did not ignore the plant or forget about it. I was attentive and caring and supportive, I just chose to do nothing and let the plant shine on its own.

As the people I support grow into their lives I hope that they have no idea how much I have done for them and how hard I worked to do nothing at exactly the right time.

About the author:

Kevin Alexander, Developmental Service Worker/Direct Support Professional, is the author of "The Way of the Support Worker" (NADD press 2016). Over the past 20 years, he has travelled across Canada working with and learning from leaders in Care, Community Developmental and Behaviour Therapy. Kevin is the curator of the blog <http://wayofthesupportworker.weebly.com/>. His professional motto is "Alone I travel fast. Together we travel far."

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