



Intentional Presence: Friendship and Support Skills Supporting People to Speak What's Here

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Speaking what's here is an anchoring method that supports groups of two or more people to shift into mindfulness and presence together. It's a helpful practice for starting a conversation; it's also useful when you begin to feel disconnected or out of sync when speaking with others. During such times, speaking what's here—and supporting others to do the same—not only keeps you more connected to yourself and others, but also builds more trusting, authentic, and openhearted relationships.

Speaking what's here is an **ANCHORING**¹ method that invites us to slow down, turn our attention inside, and name our present-moment experiences. Like all anchoring techniques, speaking what's here is designed to help people shift into **MINDFULNESS** and **PRESENCE**—**STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS** that allow us to act with greater awareness, self-connection, and compassion. I often use speaking what's here to open **INTENTIONAL PRESENCE** support sessions, learning partnerships, and classes. It's the fastest way I've found for two or more people to shift into an authentic, trusting and openhearted connection together.

Speaking vulnerable experiences shifts us into delicate terrain. Our responses to others as they speak challenging truths can **TRIGGER** a wide range of reactions: every thing from deep connection and trust to anger, fear, and withdrawal. With training and practice, we can learn to support family, friends, clients and colleagues to explore and share vulnerable inner experiences in a safe, connected, and compassionate way.

Helping people to notice and speak their inner experiences is a welcome alternative to our usual ways of providing emotional support, like swapping tales of woe, cheering people up, or offering unsolicited advice. Supporting people to listen to their own emotions, needs, thoughts, dreams and desires helps them to clarify their own inner sense of things, listen to their own inner wisdom, and find the courage to act on the wisdom they receive.

Speaking What's Here: A Real-Life Example

To help you get a feel for what it looks like to support someone to speak what's here, I'd like to share a real-life example. In this example, a woman I'll call Laura is supporting her friend Bruce to explore a personal challenge. As this example

¹ Definitions for terms in **BLUE** throughout this article appear in the glossary at www.intentionalpresence.com.

unfolds, we'll pause from time to time. This will allow us to review the skills Laura is using to support Bruce to speak what's here.

Our example opens as Laura begins to speak:

Laura: So Bruce, you've expressed interest in experimenting with speaking what's here. So maybe we could take some time to experiment so you can get a feel for this. All you really need to do is listen inside and report what you're experiencing: emotions, thoughts, desires, tensions, whatever...

Bruce: (Speaking quickly and urgently) OK, that sounds good, because I've sure got a lot going on inside. I just came from a really awful meeting at work. It was really dicey. There's talk of layoffs, and the whole place is like a tinderbox right now. (Note: Bruce isn't speaking what's here yet. If he were, he'd be reporting present-moment emotions, needs, body tensions, inner conflicts, and other inner experiences instead of talking about outer situations and events from the past.)

Laura: So there's some really intense stuff going on at work around these layoffs. (Laura pauses a moment to sense what Bruce is experiencing in her own body.) And I imagine that a lot of people are fearful about possibly losing their jobs.

Bruce: Yeah. (sigh) I could lose my job too.

Believe it or not, during this short exchange, Laura has already used two important skills for supporting people to speak what's here:

Skill #1: Attuning to others

When Bruce begins to **POUR OUT** his troubles at work, Laura takes a moment to pause, put herself in his shoes, and feel what he's feeling. As she imagines herself in Bruce's situation, her body begins to **ATTUNE** to his and feel what he's experiencing. This subtle **ATTUNEMENT** is something we do unconsciously all the time. When we do this, people can sense that we're interested, engaged, and "feeling along" with them. Attuning to others builds trust and helps people to relax and open to their inner experiences.

Skill #2: Reflecting back your body's felt sense of another person's experience

As Laura attuned to Bruce as he spoke, she felt fear in her own body, and thought, "Wow, if I were in his situation, I could lose my job." Feeling this fear directly in her own body allowed her to reflect back her body's own felt sense of Bruce's experience: "I imagine that a lot of people are fearful about possibly losing their jobs." Notice that Laura doesn't merely reflect back Bruce's words. Instead she feels his experience in her own body, and then reflects her felt sense of that experience back to him. As you'll see in a moment, this eventually helps Bruce to connect with challenging feelings, needs and impulses to act that he might have otherwise pushed away.

Now back to our example:

Laura: So there's some really intense stuff going on at work around these layoffs.

Bruce: Yeah (sigh). I could lose my job too. We don't even know who's on the layoff list and who isn't. And our boss isn't allowed to tell us.

Laura: Oh wow. (She pauses to attune to Bruce's experience.) So I can imagine that a part of you could be feeling really anxious and fearful knowing that you could be on the layoff list. (Notice that she's reflecting back her body's felt sense of Bruce's experience again.)

Bruce: Yeah (big sigh and a long pause). Wow, just hearing you say that relaxed something inside of me (another big sigh and a long pause). I guess I didn't realize how much this was bothering me. I really am feeling afraid about this whole job thing.

Skill #3: Naming emotions, needs, and other inner experiences

This is a turning point for Bruce: now he's shifted into mindfulness, a state of consciousness that allows us to calmly observe our inner experiences. Thanks to Laura's skillful reflection of her own felt emotions, Bruce is starting to connect with *his*.

Before the shift into mindfulness Bruce was in a state of consciousness we call **ACTIVATION**. In activation, intense emotions and thoughts tend to take us over and speak *through* us. During activation, we react, instead of speaking *about* our reactions.

Read the italicized passage above and see if you can notice the point when Bruce shifts into mindfulness and begins speaking what's here. To do this, notice when Bruce starts to focus on himself and speak about his inner experiences instead of focusing on outer people or events.

I've marked the moment Bruce shifts into mindfulness in boldface below:

A Question People Often Ask

*Why didn't Laura tell Bruce that he wasn't in mindfulness when she first started supporting him? Why did she let him spend so much time **SPEAKING FROM PARTS**, which distracted him from his inner, present-moment experiences?*

- Because Bruce was new to the practice of mindfulness and presence,
- Because attuning with Bruce gave Laura the sense that this would be too much for him too soon, and
- Because even when supporting someone who's experienced in shifting into mindfulness and presence, it usually takes a few minutes of good attuning, reflecting, and naming inner experiences until the more vulnerable parts of that person feel safe enough to share challenging inner experiences.

Laura: So I can imagine that a part of you could be feeling really anxious and fearful knowing that you could be on the list.

*Bruce: Yeah (big sigh and a long pause). **Wow, just hearing you say that relaxed something inside of me.***

Notice what happens here? Instead of speaking about other people or outer events and situations, Bruce is now speaking about what he's just experienced inside. This marks the shift into mindfulness, a state of calm, conscious, non-judgmental observation of your present-moment experiences.

What helped Bruce to shift into mindfulness? Laura has been sensing his inner experiences in her own body and naming the thoughts and emotions she's been picking up, for example:

- *I imagine that a lot of people are fearful about losing their jobs.*
- *I imagine a part of you could feel really anxious and fearful knowing that you could be on the layoff list.*

Naming emotions Laura felt in her own body gently pointed Bruce toward his own inner experiences. Further, the empathic way that Laura mentions these emotions makes it clear to Bruce that she's not going to judge him for feeling afraid. She's not going to try to talk him out of his feelings or fix them by saying things like:

- *Oh Bruce, you shouldn't worry so much. Worrying is a waste of energy.*
- *Look on the bright side Bruce; losing your job could allow you to get an even better one.*
- *I lost a job once Bruce, and it was the best thing that ever happened to me.*

Why aren't reactions like this helpful? Because to gain insights about their outer experiences, people need to listen to their *inner experiences*: the emotions, needs, action impulses and other inner information arising within them after a challenging experience. If we're judging people's experiences (*Worrying is a waste, Bruce*), launching agendas about what they should experience (*Look on the bright side, Bruce*) or making personal comments (*I lost a job once, Bruce*), we're making so much noise with our own reactions that people can't listen inside to *theirs*. When this happens, we actually *increase* the time it's going to take for people to move through a painful or challenging experience and mine the learning and growth that experience has to offer.

Because Laura's awareness is anchored in both mindfulness (a state of slow, calm, non-judgment) *and* presence (a state of warm, appreciative, connected empathy), her words transmit the silent ring of non-judgment and compassion. This allows

Bruce to feel safe enough to not only *feel* how afraid he is, but actually speak his vulnerable feelings to Laura.

Now back to our example:

Laura: So just turning toward that fearful part of you, going really slow, and seeing what you notice inside. (long silence)

Bruce: What do you mean...turning toward the fear?

Laura: Now that you've noticed the fear inside, you can just turn your attention toward it and see if you notice anything else arising inside that you want to name. So if it feels right to do this, just put your attention on the fear and take all the time you need to see if anything else arises inside.

Skill #4: Inviting people to turn towards inner experiences, stay with them, and take their time

The essence of mindfulness is slow, spacious, present-focused attention. In this passage, Laura encourages Bruce to turn his attention toward his fear to see if anything else arises inside that he wants to speak. She also encourages him to take his time. These suggestions help Bruce keep his attention turned toward his inner experiences and support him to deepen into the slow, spacious pace of mindfulness.

Now back to our example:

Laura: So if it feels right to do this, just put your attention on the fear and take all the time you need to see if anything else arises inside.

Bruce: (long silence) I had no idea how afraid I was of this layoff.

Laura: (pause) So what you notice inside is a surprise. A part of you is surprised that you're feeling so much fear around this. (Notice that Laura is naming inner experiences again—this time a new emotion: surprise.)

Bruce: Yes.

Laura: I really get how weird it can be to bump into a strong feeling that you didn't even know was there. You're really surprised about this. (Laura is reflecting her felt sense of Bruce's experience again.)

Bruce: Yeah, exactly.

Laura: So now that you've named that surprise, just taking all the time you need to be with this part of you that's afraid of losing your job. (Laura is helping Bruce to turn toward his experience again.) Just taking all the time you need to notice what comes

up in your body as you stay with that fearful part of you. (Laura is encouraging Bruce to go take his time again.)

Bruce: OK. (sigh) (long silence) I can feel the fear coursing all through my body. (pause) My heart is pounding, and my breathing is speeding up (long pause). And I'm noticing all these voices in my head kind of arguing.

Laura: So it feels like there's a lot of tension building up inside and some voices sort of fighting back and forth. (Laura's reflecting her felt sense of Bruce's experience again.)

Bruce: (big sigh) Yeah. (Bruce's sighs are signs he's relaxing deeper into mindfulness.)

Laura: And what are the arguing voices saying? (Asking this is just another way to ask Bruce to turn toward his inner experiences.)

Bruce: One voice is saying, "Just forget about the future and trust the process." Another voice is screaming, "Relax?! No way! You should march right into your bosses' office and tell him that you absolutely need to know where you stand with your job."

Laura: So there's a part of you that wants to just let go and trust that everything will work out OK. And another part of you doesn't like that part's agenda; it wants you to take action and ask your boss if you're going to lose your job or not.

Bruce: Yep, exactly...(big sigh, long pause)

Skill #5: Naming parts and parts dynamics

In this passage, Laura reflects back two **PARTS** of Bruce's inner awareness: the part that wants to let go and trust and the part that wants to take action. She also names some of the dynamics she notices between them: the "take action" part doesn't like the "letting go" part's agenda of relaxing and trusting.

What are these different parts of our inner awareness, these voices that argue and chatter inside of us? You might picture them as different energy fields within our overall field of awareness. Humans are complex beings capable of experiencing many different **NEEDS** and **DESIRES** at the same time. As daily challenges arise, different parts of our **REACTIVE AWARENESS** get **DESIRES** at the same time. Each of these parts—or energy fields—carries different desires, needs, emotions, and opinions about what to do.

Naming different parts of our reactive awareness as they arise helps us to gain distance from our reactions and listen impartially to the needs, desires, and other information that they communicate.

Now back to Bruce and Laura:

Laura: So just taking all the time you need to be with these two parts of you: the part that wants to let go and trust and the one that wants to march into your bosses' office.

Bruce (short pause): I guess the angry part of me is the one I'm really noticing. Wow, I'm so angry with my boss. I mean, my wife and I just bought a new house, and we have a ton of medical bills with our youngest son. (Note: At this point, Bruce has slipped out of mindfulness into activation. Now an angry part of his reactive awareness is leading Bruce's words and actions instead of the calm observing awareness that was present a few minutes earlier.) How dare my boss withhold this information from me? If I'm going to lose my job, I need all the time I can get to look for something new. (Bruce goes on for a few minutes until Laura notices she's been spacing out for a few minutes.)

Laura (interrupting): So Bruce, I notice that I'm having a hard time staying connected with you right now and I really want to stay connected. I notice that you're speaking faster than you were before without many pauses, and I'm having a hard time taking in all the details. Would it be OK to take a minute to slow things down? I need to take a couple breaths and then I want to make sure I followed what you were experiencing inside while you were talking.

Bruce (sounding kind of disoriented): OK....sure.

Skill #6: Tracking for speed and connection

In the passage above, Laura demonstrates several important skills for supporting people to speak what's here, including *tracking for speed and connection*. If I could teach you only one skill for noticing the shift out of mindfulness or presence, I'd choose this skill hands down. Let me take a minute to explain why tracking for speed and connection is so important.

As we mentioned earlier, speaking what's here is an anchoring method. When we support people to anchor, we're supporting them to shift their **STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS** into mindfulness at a minimum. Mindfulness is a state of consciousness that allows us to calmly, slowly and spaciously observe and report our inner experiences.

The part of the brain that leads during our more automatic daily awareness (the **SUBCONSCIOUS MIND**) fires about *forty million* nerve impulses of information per second. The part of the brain that leads during mindfulness (the conscious mind) fires about *forty* nerve impulses of information per second. So believe me, mindfulness feels really, really slow when compared to the **AUTOMATIC AWARENESS** that we experience around 90 to 98% of the day. With this in mind:

Tracking for speed is a very simple way to determine if you or others have slipped out of mindfulness. Tracking for speed means paying attention to:

- The speed of your speech, thoughts, breathing, heartbeat, habitual movements (or other peoples')

- The sense of urgency or intensity in your voice or body (or other peoples')
- Lack of pauses between sentences (These tend to show up more often in mindfulness.)
- Moments when people interrupt each other or talk at the same time (This rarely happens when we're in mindfulness, and happens even less in presence.)

Tracking for connection helps you to notice when you've shifted into—or out of—presence. Presence is a state of consciousness that brings a warm, openhearted, compassionate sense of connection with yourself and others. So checking to see if you feel connected with your self or the people you're with is a simple and effective way to see if you're anchored in presence.

In the passage above, tracking for speed helps Laura to realize that Bruce's pace is starting to quicken, signaling that he's likely to have shifted out of mindfulness. Tracking for connection helps her to realize that she's feeling spaced out and disconnected from Bruce—a sign that she's shifted out of [PRESENCE](#).

Skill #7: Speaking your truth when you feel disconnected

Let's review one last skill that Laura uses in the passage above. When she notices that she's suddenly feeling disconnected from Bruce, she tells him the honest, unvarnished truth:

- *I'm having a hard time staying connected to you right now, and I really want to stay connected.*
- *I notice that you're speaking much faster than you were before, and I'm having a hard time taking in all the details.*

Telling people that we're feeling disconnected is considered embarrassing and impolite, at least in Western culture. What's "polite" in our culture is to lie: to pretend we're listening when we're not. Few of us realize that the habit of not speaking up when we're disconnected has the opposite effect of what we all deeply long for: it *undermines* connection instead of supporting it.

For me, it's taken both courage and moral resolve to break out of this deeply conditioned habit. Pretending to be listening when I'm not goes against my values of authenticity and respect for others. What's worse: If I disconnect from others and pretend to be listening, they silently *know* that I'm disconnected; *they can sense it inside*. So now I'm pretending to be connected, and you're pretending not to know that I'm disconnected. And from this state of mutual pretending, we expect to connect authentically. No wonder our relationships are often so disappointing and unfulfilling!

To maintain an honest, trusting connection with yourself and others, it's best to speak up anytime you feel disconnected. ***The sooner you name a disconnect, the sooner you can anchor and reconnect.***

Skill #8: Asking for what you need to stay connected

After Laura tells Bruce that she's feeling disconnected, she asks for what she needs to reconnect:

"Would it be OK to take a minute to slow things down? I need to take a couple breaths and then I want to make sure I followed what you were experiencing inside while you were just talking."

When supporting others, a stoic part of ourselves often thinks that it's inappropriate to ask for things we need. At such times, we think we need to be 100% focused on the other person and their needs, with 0% attention focused on our self. When practicing intentional presence, everyone involved senses into their needs, paying particular attention to *what's needed to stay slow and connected*. If we don't ask for what we need to stay slow and connected, we're likely to end up disconnected. And if we end up disconnected, we can't support each other effectively.

How Speaking What's Here Supports Others

Sometimes supporting people to speak what's here is all that's needed to carry a stuck or painful situation forward. At other times, other support skills are needed. In Bruce and Laura's situation, speaking what's here actually helped Bruce to find a clear next step to carry forward his situation at work. Let's review one final interaction between them to see how their interaction ends:

Laura: Would it be OK if we took a minute to slow things down? I need to take a couple of breaths and then I want to make sure I'm following what you were experiencing.

Bruce (sounding kind of disoriented): OK....sure.

Laura: (long silence) OK, I'm feeling a bit slower and more connected now.

Bruce: Yeah, me too. That anger really flooded in and took me over. Sorry...

Laura: It sounds to me like that angry part of you just really needed to be heard. (long pause) And it seems like this angry part of you has a need for information. You want to know where you stand with your job so you can plan for your future, especially given your son's medical condition and your new house. (Laura is naming inner experiences again, this time a need.)

Bruce: (long silence) Yeah, you know, something opened up in me as you said that. (long silence) I really do need information. I need to know where I stand. (long pause) Yeah, you know...(pause) all of a sudden, it's just so clear to me that I'd like to sit down

with my boss and explain my situation. I want to ask him if he might make an exception and tell me where I stand with the layoffs right away. He might not agree, but at least I'll be taking action. That seems to calm down my anger. And even the fear I was feeling before relaxes as I think of doing that. It will feel good somehow just to ask, no matter how things turn out.

People don't always end up with such a clear action step when we support them to speak what's here. But the dialogue between Laura and Bruce illustrates a key principle of intentional presence: when we support people to notice and speak their inner experiences, they gain the insights needed to move their lives forward. Instead of clobbering people over the head with advice, we can help them to connect with and benefit from their own inner counsel.

Good Support Flows from Your State of Consciousness

People are always asking me for lists of steps and skills, and the eight skills we just reviewed for supporting people to speak what's here are important tools. That said, ***the state of consciousness you're in is the most important ingredient of skillful emotional and spiritual support.*** The skills we just reviewed will work beautifully when we're anchored in mindfulness and presence. But when we shift into activation—a state of consciousness that isn't designed for connecting with ourselves and others—we either forget to use these skills, or our attempts to use them rarely work well.

I frequently see deeply skilled people falter when they slip out of mindfulness into activation. It's as if their skills for supporting people fly out the window from one minute to the next. Despite years of training and experience, this still happens to me with startling regularity! To up your odds of staying anchored, remember to track for speed and connection—and ask everyone present to do the same. This is one of the best ways I know to ensure that we're in the right state of consciousness to use the skills we've just reviewed in a skillful and supportive way.

Try It For Yourself

If you'd like to practice supporting someone to speak what's here, ask a friend to join you in a fifteen-minute experiment designed to help you shift into a slower, calmer, more connected state of consciousness together. To practice:

1. Sit down together in a quiet, private place (in person, on Skype, or on the phone).
2. Invite your friend to speak his or her present-moment experiences.
3. As your friend speaks practice just two or three of the support skills listed above.
4. Spend ten minutes supporting your friend to speak what's here, and five minutes discussing what you learned from the experiment.

I wish you rich and learning-full experiences as you practice supporting others to speak what's here. If time permits, let me know what you learn and discover along the way.

Appendix: Summary of Skills for Supporting People to Speak What's Here

#	Skill	Description/Key Points	Example
1*	<i>Attune to the other person.</i>	Feel what the other person is experiencing in <i>your</i> body.	Although Bruce doesn't tell Laura that he's afraid of losing his job, Laura senses fear in her body as he speaks.
2*	<i>Reflect your body's felt sense of the person's experience.</i>	Reflect back what you're feeling and experiencing inside as people talk (instead of just parroting their words.)	Laura says to Bruce: <i>"I imagine you must feel anxious and fearful knowing that you might be on the layoff list."</i>
3*	<i>Name emotions, needs, and other inner experiences.</i>	Name inner experiences that you sense the other person might not be fully aware of yet.	After Bruce mentions that he'd like to march into his bosses' office and demand to know if he's on the layoff list, Laura says, <i>"It sounds like a part of you is feeling anxious and has a need for information."</i>
4	<i>Invite people to turn toward inner experiences, stay with them, and take their time.</i>	Turning peoples' attention towards inner experiences helps them to get clear on their emotions and needs and find the resolve to act on them.	After Bruce mentions that he's afraid of losing his job, Laura says, <i>"So just turning toward that fearful part of you, going really slow, and seeing what you notice inside."</i>
5	<i>Name parts and parts dynamics.</i>	Name different parts of the person's reactive awareness that are activated and key relationships and interactions between those parts.	Laura says to Bruce: <i>"So there's a part of you that wants to just let go and trust that everything will work out. And there's another part of you doesn't like that part; it wants you to take action and talk to your boss."</i>
6	<i>Track for speed and connection.</i>	Notice fast, urgent or tense speech or thoughts (signs of the shift out of mindfulness) or a feeling of disconnection with yourself or others (signs of the shift out of presence).	As Bruce launches into a fast-paced monologue, Laura notices a change in speed. (He's talking much faster.) She also notices a change in their connection. (She's started to space out and drift off.)
7	<i>Speak up when you feel disconnected.</i>	Be honest about times of disconnect instead of faking it.	Instead of pretending to listen to Bruce's monologue, Laura admits: <i>"I'm having a hard time staying connected to you right now, and I really want to stay connected."</i>
8	<i>Ask for what you need to stay connected.</i>	Remember: the sooner you speak disconnects, the sooner you can reconnect.	In the middle of Bruce's monologue, Laura asks: <i>"Would it be OK if we took a minute to slow things down?"</i>

Please note: Skills marked with an asterisk above are part of a larger skill set that we call "giving empathy to others."

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