



Intentional Presence: Friendship and Support Skills What Is Presence-Centered Friendship?

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*I think I could turn and live with the animals,
They are so placid and self-contained;
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition;
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins.
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God.
Not one is dissatisfied—not one is demented with the mania of owning things;
Not one kneels to another, nor his kind that lived thousands of years ago.*

- Walt Whitman

People often tell me that they grieve more deeply following a pet's death than they do for most family and friends. When I ask them why, their chief reason often goes something like this: "Animals don't judge you; they accept you completely and love you unconditionally."

Unfortunately, despite our good intentions, our habitual ways of interacting—those we learned decades ago from watching the world around us—are often anything but loving and supportive. But what if we could learn new friendship skills to move us beyond habits like gossip, criticism, complaint, offering unsolicited advice, and veiled attempts to change each other? How might our lives transform if our friends could be as unconditionally present, accepting and loving as your average West Highland Terrier or household tabby cat?

Although we aren't yet as skillful as our pets, a small group of colleagues in our intentional presence learning labs¹ have slowly been discovering new ways of supporting one another that we never dreamed possible. One skill we've been practicing is intentionally shifting into a state of compassionate, nonjudgmental presence at times when abrupt emotional reactions might otherwise cause us to judge our friends, distance ourselves from them, or say things we really don't mean. As we persistently practiced skills for being unconditionally present with ourselves and others, we realized that our friendships had changed more in a year or two than they'd changed in the past ten or twenty before. Because these unexpected changes came through shifting into deeper states of presence, we've begun to call this surprising new territory *presence-centered friendship*.

¹ For more on our learning labs and how to join them, see the STUDY menu choice at www.intentionalpresence.com.

What Is Presence-Centered Friendship?

I'm not sure we "discovered" presence-centered friendship; it feels more like it discovered us. It's as if something inside of us knew we were tired of our old ways of relating and had a whole new type of friendship waiting in the wings. By some act of grace, we now have the eyes to see it; and through fumbling, painstaking practice, we are slowly learning to *be* it.

At this point in its evolution, any attempt to define presence-centered friendship would probably be woefully incomplete. That said, I'm committed to defining new terms carefully, so take a moment to review the definition in the text box on this page, and see if it makes sense to you.

Intentional presence offers a comprehensive set of skills for being unconditionally present with yourself and others. The skills of intentional presence differ a bit from therapy or other forms of skilled peer support (for example, Co-Counseling or Focusing partnerships.) Although you can use the skills that intentional presence offers in structured support sessions (for example, therapy or coaching sessions), they're also designed for use in the heat of everyday life, for example when:

- Intense emotional reactions arise,
- You've said or done something you regret,
- You feel disconnected or upset by something others have said or done, or
- You feel blocked or stuck in taking action to move your life forward.

You might think of the skills that intentional presence offers as a daily awareness practice or a set of life skills. One friend recently said that practicing presence turns your life into "a personal art form." For me, practicing the skills of intentional presence with friends has opened a whole new way of interacting with my friends: one that allows us to support real, honest-to-God change in each other's lives.

Have We Outgrown Our Old Forms of Friendship?

For a long time now, I've sensed that our old forms of habitual, unskilled friendship no longer fit our more sophisticated psychological and spiritual awareness, but I haven't quite known what to do about it. I suspect that there will always be a place among friends for exchanging news, doing fun things together, and helping each other with physical tasks like childcare or home maintenance. But for me at least, it's the emotional support element of friendship that's started feeling a bit like a shoe that doesn't quite fit, causing even my oldest, dearest friendships to develop a slight but noticeable limp.

DEFINITION

Presence-Centered Friendship **(n.)**

A new form of friendship in which two or more people commit to learning and practicing concrete skills together that allow them to be more present with themselves and others, communicate more authentically, break free of limiting habits, and provide each other with more skillful emotional and spiritual support

Apparently my friendships aren't the only ones starting to show signs of wear. In recent years, I've heard growing numbers of people lament the lack of good emotional support in their lives. After recently receiving a hurtful email from an old friend, my partner Dick quipped that state governments should require friendship licenses with rules of the road for courteous navigation, and training to avoid hurtful accidents caused by unconscious ways of relating.

Before learning to build presence-centered friendships, I noticed that the emotional support friends offered tended to follow the same energy-zapping arc year after year: I would complain about the same old things. Friends would offer the same upbeat reassurances, the same predictable advice, and the same stale philosophical or spiritual platitudes. Nothing changed in our lives as a result of this so-called emotional support, and frankly, we didn't expect it to.

But what if friendship could support us to create lasting change in each other's lives? What if your interactions with your Aunt Mary actually helped her to stop complaining, listen to her anger, and address the unmet needs beneath her frustrated complaints? What if weekly meetings with your friend Bob over decaf lattes during the next six months could help him break free of the tendency to isolate himself and numb out with beer and TV when he's feeling upset? These are the kinds of changes that we're starting to realize are possible when friends learn to support each other in more conscious, skillful ways.

The Difference between Traditional and Presence-Centered Friendship

Presence-centered friendship grew out of a discipline I call intentional presence, a set of integrated spiritual and psychological skills I've developed to help people break free of limiting habits and live more conscious, fulfilling lives.² Intentional presence originally consisted of two different skill sets: life skills for everyday people and facilitation skills for psychotherapists, coaches and other helping professionals. But lately we've begun to realize that many skills originally intended for therapy and coaching are equally powerful for creating more conscious, supportive, and authentic friendships.

Many friendships are therapeutic at times, providing comfort when troubles strike. But traditional friendship tends to generate comfort through activities that dull intense emotions or distract us from them, like complaining, gossiping, changing the subject, praising each other, exchanging spiritual platitudes, or cheering each other up. Conversely, presence-centered friends are trained to listen intently to emotions, needs, conflicting desires, and other inner experiences, helping each other to feel into their own

² Although I created the original framework for intentional presence, its ongoing development has slowly evolved into a co-creation. Some of its more recent practices and perspectives have arisen from a group of intrepid spiritual practitioners and psychotherapists who've met regularly for several years to experiment with new methods of inner exploration and interpersonal support. Without this group of daring and visionary souls, presence-centered friendship might never have happened; I'm deeply grateful for their contributions to its continued growth.

inner sense of things, connect with their own innate wisdom, and find the courage to act on it.

Here are some of the differences between traditional emotional support and presence-centered friendship:

Traditional Friendship	Presence-Centered Friendship
Cheer your friends up, ease their troubles, and help them get their minds off their problems	Support friends to listen to their emotions and discover the unseen needs and limiting beliefs behind them. Help friends mine the lessons and wisdom in their present-moment experiences—even deeply painful ones.
Complain and console Gossip about others	Make agreements to help each other notice and interrupt emotion-numbing behaviors like complaint and gossip. Support each other to listen inside for the emotions and needs behind these behaviors.
Make veiled putdowns of each other by joking, teasing, repeating embarrassing stories, etc.	Help friends connect with critical parts of themselves to discover the emotions, needs and deeper desires beneath the unconscious behavior of subtle putdowns.
When friends say hurtful things, either say nothing, tell them you're hurt and set boundaries, or attack back	When friends say hurtful things, speak the truth about how it affected you, and ask for what you need to stay connected instead of withdrawing.
Try to fix, change or preach to friends (e.g., offer unsolicited advice or provide spiritual wisdom you think they lack)	Help friends to listen to the wisdom of their own inner voice, and recognize their unique qualities and talents.
Point out friends' faults	Affirm friends' unique qualities (e.g., courage, persistence). Admit your own limiting habits and behaviors as they arise, which will encourage friends to do the same.
Exchange spiritual theories or platitudes or talk about spiritual books	Use targeted practices to connect with your own spiritual wisdom during in-the-moment conversations.
Chat so excitedly about your ideas for helping your friend that s/he can't get a word in edgewise	Use practices to slow down and get separate from your "excited part." Shift into presence so you can stay connected to both your friend <i>and</i> your excitement, instead of letting excitement unconsciously take you over.

Presence-centered friendship represents a sea change from the relationships most of us currently experience. For that reason, mastering it requires mentoring, practice and patience. Its in-depth psychological and spiritual skills require the same level of

committed hands-on practice as mindfulness-based self-discovery methods³ like Focusing, Hakomi, Internal Family Systems Therapy, Psychosynthesis, Buddhist psychology, Jungian Active Imagination, Voice Dialogue, or Non-Violent Communication—practices with which it shares much in common.

In many ways, learning presence-centered friendship is like studying a musical instrument: first you learn to read notes, then you master scales or chords, and then you start playing simple little pieces. After that, you practice, and practice, and PRACTICE, and after a few years, and a lot of sour notes, you can finally make some real music.

Presence-Centered Friendship: A Real-Life Example

In a moment, I want to share an example of a real-life disconnect with one of my friends and how we used the friendship and support skills that intentional presence teaches to address it. This friend tends to go off on long monologues about topics that seem irrelevant to what we're discussing. In intentional presence, we call this "pouring out."⁴

Before I discovered the skills of intentional presence, here's what I used to do to encourage friends and colleagues to stop pouring out:

- Try to change the subject
- Try to cheer them up and calm them down
- Point out positives to help them see things more holistically
- Try to get them to see that rambling on wasn't helping to solve the problem

Frankly, these methods didn't work too well, and in time I began to realize that they were actually violent. Here's why: I was trying to change other people without honestly telling them that I was trying to change them. Although my intention was honorable (trying to stay connected with the other person), my actions to support my need for connection were both dishonest and manipulative.

Pouring out is a common behavior that creates disconnects in relationships. To address it effectively, it's important to understand why people do it. People often pour out long, unclear or rambling monologues in an unconscious attempt to turn away from their emotions and needs. To help people stop pouring out, we can support them to turn towards their emotions and needs and listen inside. Further, we can ask people for what we need to stay connected to them. Here's an example of some of those skills in action:

R: So Lucy, I noticed that you just talked for about five minutes about your old painting classes back in college, and when I tried to respond, you just kept talking over me. Things are feeling a little fast for me, and I need a minute to slow down and take in what you're saying. Would that be OK with you?

³ Psycho-spiritual practices: approaches to supporting self-awareness and changes in behavior that typically include a blend of theories and methods drawn from spiritual practice, psychology, and various life sciences.

⁴ Many thanks to Gene Gendlin, the founder of Focusing, for this wonderful term.

L: Yeah. (pause) Hmm...I am going a little fast, aren't I?⁵

R: Yeah, for me, it feels a little fast, because I'm having a hard time following you. It would feel good to slow down, because I really want to get what you're saying and why it's important to you. (We both take a moment to quiet down and connect with ourselves.)

R: So, here's what I'm seeing about our conversation: we were trying to resolve a conflict that came up for you last week at work, and then you switched to talking about your old painting class back in college. I really wanted to stay connected to you and follow what you were saying, but I couldn't. I realized during the silence that I have a need for understanding. I want to understand why you're telling me this story about painting class. Would you be willing to tell me why you switched gears and started talking about that so I can stay connected to you?

L: Oh, I see. OK. So.... (pause)... I'm going to just slow down and get quiet (long pause). I see now that I just shifted into automatic awareness⁶ and started telling you that story (pause). I'm not even sure I know why I was telling you that.

R: Oh...okay.

L: (long pause) You know, something lit up inside when you mentioned wanting to stay connected. I realized that when I switch gears like that, it feels like I'm just talking to myself; I don't even feel connected to you—or even to me.

R: Yeah, that's exactly how it feels when I do that.

L: So I need to slow down a little more... Let me just take a minute to see what's up inside and why I was going on like that. (long silence; maybe two or three minutes) Oh...oh....I see what happened now. You mentioned something about painting a new picture of the possibilities for my work situation a few minutes before. And that word "painting" (pause) ... somehow it made my mind automatically shift to an art opening I went to the other night. (long pause) Then my mind jumped from the art opening to my art classes in college. And bam, off I went. (We both laugh.)

R: I was confused, because you started talking about art classes in New Mexico twenty years ago out of the blue, and I had no idea what prompted that.

L: Hmmmm...yeah... (long silence) Why was I talking about those classes? (She takes a few

⁵ Fast, intense speech is one of many signs that we've slipped out of presence, the state of consciousness that allows us to remain deeply connected to our ourselves and others. So presence-centered friends are trained to gently monitor the intensity and connectedness of our conversations to make sure we're in presence, the state of consciousness that supports deep connection and authentic sharing.

⁶ Automatic awareness is a state of consciousness in which subconscious portions of our brain lead our actions, making it hard to act with conscious intention. To act with conscious intention, a shift from automatic awareness into mindfulness is necessary. Mastering these shifts of consciousness is a key skill in intentional presence, and an important element of presence-centered friendships.

minutes to explore quietly inside.) I'm not really sure why I switched gears like that. (I take this as an invitation to assist her to explore inside, since her own inner exploration didn't yield much information or insight.)

R: When you go back to that moment when you were talking about your art classes, do you notice anything arising inside?

L: Let me see...(long silence as she listens inside) I start feeling really upset (long pause). Oh, I see...I'm upset about something I said to a friend the other night at that art opening. (long silence) I guess I was rambling on about my art classes to numb out this upset feeling. I was just pouring out to numb that out.

R: (silence) Would it be helpful if you had some time to connect with that part of yourself that feels bad about the art opening?

L: Yeah, that would be great.

R: So just take all the time you need, and let me know if you need any support.

L: (long silence) A part of me feels so bad about what happened the other night at the opening. I feel kind of ashamed.

R: (long pause) What's that part of you ashamed about?

L: (long silence) I feel embarrassed about something I said to friend of mine at the opening. I kind of put her down in a subtle way without meaning to do that. (We explore what this part of her needs; after awhile, she realizes that she has a need for respecting others and wants to apologize to her friend for what she said. As she pictures herself apologizing, her whole body relaxes, and this "next step" feels just right to her.)

What It Takes To Grow a Presence-Centered Friendship

This ten-minute slice of conversation appears deceptively simple, but it took us over two years of repeated practice to get there:

- First we had to learn to consciously shift from activation and automatic awareness (states of consciousness in which disconnected, unconscious, and unintentional behavior often takes place) to mindfulness and presence (states of consciousness that support conscious, connected, and intentional interactions.)
- Then we had to overcome our deeply entrenched tendency to stuff our emotions and avoid discussing them with others.
- Next, I had to root out unseen beliefs that drove me to politely listen instead of asking for what I needed to stay connected to Lucy.
- Then we had to name and own the interaction pattern between us: "Lucy rambles

on; Rhonda politely listens.”

- After that, we both made a commitment to naming and noticing the pattern each time it arose, and named the pattern and jumped out of it together many times over. (This helped to train our brains to intentionally shift the habit pattern instead of mechanically repeating it.)

As you can imagine, working through these steps took time, practice and commitment. So if you’re looking for a quick fix for challenged relationships, presence-centered friendship might not be a good fit. Like learning to paint, speak a language, or master any life-changing skill, becoming a more skillful, conscious friend requires a number of skills and steps. It would be impossible to explain each step it takes to learn presence-centered friendship in this article, but I *can* suggest a first step.

The First Step Toward More Supportive Friendships

For me at least, the fact that I never really expected my friendships to change—let alone *change my life*—was the real pebble in my shoe, the real cause of the limp in my friend-to-friend interactions. My beliefs about my friends and what our friendships might and might not achieve were like prison bars locking me into in old ways of being. One of my first spiritual teachers used to say that humankind’s greatest limitation was the paucity of its desires, and that was certainly the case for me: I never even imagined that my friends and friendships could change, so they didn’t.

With this in mind, the first step I’d suggest to improve your relationships with family and friends is to *expect more from your friendships*. Imagine that a new kind of friendship is possible, and embrace a new vision for what you and your friends might attain together. To start building that vision, you might consider taking some time with just one friend to discuss just one change that you might like to work towards together. Know that with the right mix of honesty, tenderness, and commitment, you’re both capable of discovering a whole new way of being human.

On days when I let myself dream ridiculously big dreams, I picture people everywhere offering each other skilled emotional and spiritual support—support that allows wars to end, support that allows broken children to grow into whole adults, support that allows all of us to experience a little bit more of who we really are. To make that dream a reality, all you need to do is to speak to just one friend or family member about just one change you’d like to make to support your friendship to grow. Because as behavioral scientist Meg Wheatley once observed, every significant social change the world has ever known begins in the same humble way: with two people—and a conversation.

Related Articles on Friendship and Support Skills

Helping Habits That Aren't Always Helpful

Supporting People to Speak What's Here

The articles above are available at www.intentionalpresence.com.

For an overview of some of the basic support skills that intentional presence teaches, see the article *Supporting People to Speak What's Here*.

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