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Holding Space: The Art of Being Present with Others

By Adam Brady



Holding space is a conscious act of being present, open, allowing, and protective of what another needs in each moment. The term has been growing in popularity among caregivers, healers, yogis, and spiritual seekers. It's a broadly used phrase to define the act of "being there" for another. The effects of this practice, however, go much deeper than simply offering support.

Consider the individual words for a moment. To *hold* means to embrace or encircle someone or something in your grasp. Physically, this might take the form of a hug or the cradling of a hand in yours. But you can also embrace someone non-physically with your intention, attention, and energy. *Space* refers to the immediate environment you are sharing with another. This, too, may be the physical space of a room, but more frequently refers to the mental and emotional environment you are in with others. Put together, these words embody the principle of *surrounding the environment with your awareness in way that provides comfort and compassion for all*.

Holding space involves several specific qualities of consciously relating to others, the sum of which are greater than the individual parts. Let's explore these attributes and see how they can deepen your ability to hold space for others.

Safety

A key component to holding space is the quality of safety. For others to be open, genuine, and oftentimes vulnerable, they must feel secure and have a sense of trust. People won't let down their defenses until they know it is safe to do so.

Like a medieval cathedral nestled within the city's fortress walls, you need to create an environment in which all who enter feel protected from harm. This safety implies an unspoken "sheepdog" mentality that serves as a guardian and authentically maintains confidentiality, transparency, and impeccability in all you say and do.

Suspended Self-Importance

A vitally important aspect of holding space is the understanding that *it's not about you*. When you hold space you must make the conscious decision to leave your ego at the door. Holding space is about serving others and your personal concerns or needs are not part of the process. Suspending your sense of self-importance can be challenging and should be considered a prerequisite for the practice. If you aren't able to put your ego in the back for a time, you'll be ill-suited to be present for the needs of others. Holding space requires radical humility and the willingness to be a temporary caretaker of the feelings and concerns of another.

Attention

One of the most precious gifts you can give another is the gift of your full and complete attention. However, listening attentively without the need to respond, interrupt, or comment is a skill that takes considerable practice to master. Even with the best of intentions, your ego may sneak back in; it looks for opportunities to subtly make things about you instead of the other.

When holding space you must work diligently to maintain eye contact, be free of distractions, be fully attentive, and cultivate an openness or "space consciousness" in which there is no "me," but rather the ever-present witness of the sounding board of consciousness.

To this end, make the commitment to cultivate what British author Stuart Wilde called *silent power* by resisting the urge to speak unless you are asked to. This, coupled with your full awareness, can be a profoundly powerful experience for those in your presence. Your attention, focused and all-inclusive of whatever is happening in the moment, opens the door for others to see the reflection of their own soul in you—the Self talking to itself.

Practice Acceptance

Holding space is all about allowing—allowing this person or group to feel what they feel. Allowing them to say what they need to say. Allowing yourself to be whatever *they* need you to be right now. Holding space, therefore, isn't about controlling anything. Your role is that of a guardian of the space. Like two cupped hands filled with water, you are there to hold the other with your awareness. In doing so, you must allow that experience to take whatever shape it will.

Accept this moment as it is. Accept others as they are, without any desire to change them, or wanting them to be something different. This, too, can be a challenge since you are conditioned to immediately try to change things you think should be different. But, in holding space, practicing acceptance gives others a priceless gift—the freedom to be just as they are.

Nonjudgement

Holding space is an impartial process. You're not there to pass judgement or to evaluate another. When you judge another's experience you create additional mental static that will only get in the way and obscure the truth. In the moment when you're holding another's fears, [suffering](#), or grief, your opinions are irrelevant.

Unless you've been through what they're going through, you'll never truly understand their feelings. Being there is enough. Good and bad are merely a matter of perspective and in this moment, your perspective isn't the one that's important.

Compassion

Although you nonjudgmentally practice acceptance with your full attention, that doesn't mean you wouldn't prefer things to be better. [Compassion](#) is an essential quality for the practice of holding space. To embrace another in acceptance is an act of compassion in and of itself. In your openness to the pain of others you are essentially saying, "How can I help you? I don't want you to hurt. What can I do to help support your highest good?" Even if not spoken aloud, these intentions to relieve the suffering of others are the essence of compassion.

In many cases, simply being a loving presence can bring about a deep sense of relief that eases the pain of another. The world can use more compassion, so the practice of holding space provides an opportunity to continually build this vitally important skill.

Witnessing

Witnessing allows you to play a special part while holding space—that of the observer. Like in quantum physics, the observer is what triggers the collapse of the wave of potential into a particle, the non-local into the localized phenomenon. But this doesn't involve any action on the observer's part. In holding space you're just there as the witness, almost like a fly on the wall. Naturally, you can participate if requested to do so, but essentially your role is that of the watcher.

It is said that when Gautama (the future Buddha) was on the verge of enlightenment, he was tempted by the forces of darkness and their king, the demon Mara. With his entire demon army descending upon them, Mara demands the Gautama produce a witness to his awakening. Gautama simply touches the earth with his fingers and says, "The earth itself is my witness." With this gesture, Mara and his army vanish, and Gautama becomes the Buddha or Awakened One. Like the earth the Buddha touches, you are the witnesses to those who you hold space for.

Through the practice of holding space, you serve as a container for which the healing and transformation can take place. It's a powerful gift of presence that you can give to others through the quality of your attention.