

Overview for Participants

“There’s nothing that feels so compassionate as being sincerely heard.” - David Cone

Introduction:

There are a few goals of this process: for each participant 1) to feel sincerely heard, 2) to practice observing their own feelings as separate from actions, and 3) to discern their own sense of comfort / safety. You will each have a chance to share and be heard, as well as practice your listening and observing skills. In the process, you might discover you gain mindfulness and presence.

CAVEAT: This is NOT therapy. We and your fellow participants are not therapists. This is to help lighten emotional loads, not for deep emotional work. If you need deeper support, please ask for possible resources.

Creating the Container:

Compassion and heart-centered empathy are known forces for emotional healing. While I cannot promise these from your experience here, I have borrowed liberally from processes designed to help us avoid the pitfalls that get in the way of empathy and compassion.

Can you think of some things that don’t feel compassionate to you?

- On my list:
- advice
 - cheering up
 - directions
 - explanations
 - attempting to fix
 - seeming to be somewhere else (or wanting to be)

What you would like to experience to feel safe and heard?

- On my list:
- presence
 - respectful confidentiality
 - received as equal
 - playful
 - trustworthy
 - acceptance
 - equanimity

Compassion and Acceptance:

Compassion is not our highest goal here; self-acceptance is. I believe self-acceptance is more powerful than compassion. And yet you will likely feel compassion. Most important is the compassion you feel for yourself – and self-acceptance is a necessary foundation for self-compassion. As you develop more compassion and acceptance for yourself, I believe you will naturally express it towards others as well.

Thoughts, Feelings and Emotions:

There is ambiguity about semantics. I refer to “feelings” as physical and energetic (including emotional) sensations; “emotions” are a subset of those, referring to our emotional sensations. Thoughts are our mental constructs.

Our feelings (including our emotions) are our feelings; we have a right to feel whatever we feel, no justification or approval needed. Be clear that feelings are distinct from and different than behaviors - please feel anything you feel, but keep your actions respectful and safe for yourself and others. This includes choosing what you say and to whom.

Emotions are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. I believe emotions are often messages from the deepest parts of ourselves, and thus some of the most genuine information we have about who we truly are. Which is why they often feel scary to expose. These messages are about our reactions to the world around us: what we like and don’t like, where we feel supported and empowered versus where we feel

drained and disempowered. With more and better information we can make different choices.

Levels of vulnerability:

You might become aware of vulnerability, a necessary component of intimacy and connection. I believe that we are all wanting deeper connection, while at the same time feeling the fear and caution which sprouted from our failed and thwarted attempts at intimacy. We have good reasons for our reticence. And still we can take baby steps toward greater connection – most importantly with our own inner selves.

Some vague guidelines for increasing levels of vulnerability: talking about facts; talking about others; talking about your actions; talking about your thoughts; talking about your sensations; talking about your emotions. Your scale will be unique to you.

On Emotional Safety:

Emotional safety is something we aspire to create, but cannot promise. Each of us contributes to the safety we feel here. We ask you to create as safe an environment as possible for yourself and for others – this includes identifying what doesn't feel emotionally safe and asking for what does. Ultimately, it is only you who can determine to what extent a situation feels safe for you. We encourage you to take care of yourself: assess the level of trust you feel in the surroundings, and how comfortable you feel sharing with your fellow participants.

In my experience, how situations feel to us fall into one of three broad categories: 1) safe and comfortable (Comfort Zone where we rest, refresh, and regroup), 2) safe and uncomfortable (Discomfort Zone where we grow and learn), and 3) unsafe (Danger Zone where we can be retraumatized). When choosing what to share in your group, assess and honor your feelings of safety with this group. We invite you to step into your Discomfort Zone, where you choose to trust and share a bit more than you feel is comfortable for you, but never more than feels safe.

One goal for this practice is for you to learn to discern the difference between what for you feels safe yet uncomfortable, and what feels “dangerous” (your own definition, what ever it is), and to decide what to share at this time, in this place, and with these people.

Feelings vs Actions:

Another goal of this process is to practice sitting with our feelings so we can create a gap between feelings and actions. To this end, pay attention to what you feel and what you might feel drawn to do... but don't do it! (Or at least wait until after the practice...)

In our culture, we often coalesce the two into one, and then we fear the emotion of anger because it often coincides with behaviors which violate another person in some way. While actions can be detrimental, I believe pure emotions and their pure and responsible expressions rarely (if ever) are.

The Structure:

This structure for this practice may feel awkward and mechanical. I invite you to try it while you're here; take what works for you when you go. The structure is designed to keep us on a path that avoids those responses which thwart empathy and compassion, and hopefully absent those, our natural human compassion comes through.

My experience is that this practice operates a bit like yoga: we practice exercise in a structured way, and learn how the practice feels with our bodies, and yet we don't perform postures out in daily life. As we regularly practice and become familiar with the postures and how they feel good to us, we naturally learn to replicate those feelings as we interact with others. You can think of the structure like training wheels: once you learn how to ride the bike well enough to stay upright, you can ride without their assistance.

This process is designed to be used as a practice for individual development; it is not designed to be used for resolving conflicts between people, though it might be used in such situations if all the participants are familiar with the practice.

What's next?

We will agree on our “safe container”, then convene in triads to do the process. Each person will have a turn.

Thank you for being here and experimenting with us!!

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