Flexibility, Skills and Strength: Personal Training in the Collaborative Gym
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Hierarchy of Techniques

Navigating the Tension Between Tending and Moving:
A Hierarchy of General Techniques to Use in Fraught Moments

In order to make it easier to think about (and choose between) the myriad ways we can help clients to navigate fraught moments in our work, we've created a four-part continuum of types of interventions. There are infinite ways of putting these techniques into action. Every professional develops his or her own style and voice for implementing these techniques with particular clients. But here we offer a conceptual framework. As you read, note that the list of techniques begins by keeping reactions *within* the mind of the professional (technique #1), then moves outward with increasingly interpersonal activity—first toward "tending" or "opening up" emotion (techniques #2 and #3), then toward "moving," or containing emotion while sticking close to the task (technique #4).

1. **Note the emotion/s that you are having and/or that the others appear to be having, but choose not to address them openly**

   In this technique you note and mentally file the emotions away and use them a) to develop hypotheses about yourself, your clients, and yourself, and b) to later reflect on whether the emotion is being evoked in you by the client/situation or comes more from your own idiosyncratic experience and needs to be managed separately.

   > *Example: During a team meeting your client looks out the window, apparently not paying attention to the discussion. Perceive your client as being overwhelmed by the content of the conversation. You are aware of some anxiety in yourself, a pressure to comfort and re-engage them. But you carry on as you were, without changing anything about your tone or pacing, and you make no comment.*

2. **Acknowledge emotions non-verbally**

   There are a number of ways to acknowledge the emotional experience of others without words. Non-verbal interactions make-up about 90% of our interpersonal communication, and are crucial tools. There are a number of ways to acknowledge the emotional experience of others without words.

Examples:

- Seek out eye contact with client/s or colleague/s- note their responses and attempt to have a "silent conversation"
- Convey interest, concern and empathy through subtle adjustments of facial expression and/or posture while remaining silent or continuing the current line of discussion
- Use physical touch – e.g. a pat on the shoulder
- Make a connecting gesture- e.g. pass a tissue box to a client who is tearing up
- Scan the room- make eye contact with each person with a facial expression that conveys authentic curiosity and creates a sense of connection
- Use your body to create space without using words- e.g. raise a finger in a gesture indicating "Let's keep quiet for a bit folks" when one client or colleague is struggling to find words or to maintain composure

3. **Verbally acknowledge emotions by asking open-ended questions that invite clients to lean further into their feelings, explore their meanings, and share with others**

   Examples:
   - "I see that you're tearing up a bit. What just happened that triggered you?"
   - "I just saw a shift in your facial expression – not sure how to read it, but I'm interested to know what may have just happened for you." (Consider complementing your words with inviting non-verbal techniques-- such as a quizzical look or an open-palm gesture-- that are authentically *yours*)
   - "You've mentioned many times that this topic makes you anxious. Please tell me if I've got it wrong, but from the look on your face I'm guessing you're having one of *those* moments. Let's just push "pause" for a 'sec so we can talk a bit and see how you're doing with this."

4. **Verbally acknowledge emotions briefly and with limits, and return quickly to focusing on the task**

   Example:
   "This is tough stuff. I can see you're struggling. But I know you wanted to get this issue resolved today…are you ok to keep going?"