

Holding space

From Heather Plett

Holding space is not something that's exclusive to facilitators, coaches, or palliative care nurses. It is something that ALL of us can do for each other - for our partners, children, friends, neighbors, and even strangers who strike up conversations as we're riding the bus to work.

Here are the lessons I've learned from Ann and others who have held space for me.

- 1. Give people permission to trust their own intuition and wisdom.** We simply need to trust our intuition and accumulated wisdom from the many years we'd loved.
- 2. Don't take their power away.** When we take decision-making power out of people's hands, we leave them feeling useless and incompetent. There may be some times when we need to step in and make hard decisions for other people (ie. when they're dealing with an addiction and an intervention feels like the only thing that will save them), but in almost every other case, people need the autonomy to make their own choices.
- 3. Keep your own ego out of it.** This is a big one. We all get caught in that trap now and then - when we begin to believe that someone else's success is dependent on our intervention, or when we think that their failure reflects poorly on us, or when we're convinced that whatever emotions they choose to unload on us are about us instead of them. It's a trap I've occasionally found myself slipping into when I teach. I can become more concerned about my own success (Do the students like me? Do their marks reflect on my ability to teach? Etc.) than about the success of my students. But that doesn't serve anyone - not even me. To truly support their growth, I need to keep my ego out of it and create the space where they have the opportunity to grow and learn.
- 4. Make them feel safe enough to fail.** When people are learning, growing, or going through grief or transition, they are bound to make some mistakes along the way. When we, as their space holders, withhold judgment and shame, we offer them the opportunity to reach inside themselves to find the courage to take risks and the resilience to keep going even when they fail. When we let them know that failure is simply a part of the journey and not the end of the world, they'll spend less time beating themselves up for it and more time learning from their mistakes.
- 5. Give guidance and help with humility and thoughtfulness.** A wise space holder knows when to withhold guidance (ie. when it makes a person feel foolish and inadequate) and when to offer it gently (ie. when a person asks for it or is too lost to know what to ask for). This is a careful dance that we all must do when we hold space for other people. Recognizing the areas in which they feel most vulnerable and incapable and offering the right kind of help without shaming them takes practice and humility. Do not take their power or autonomy away.
- 6. Create a container for complex emotions, fear, trauma, etc.** When people feel that they are held in a deeper way than they are used to, they feel safe enough to allow complex emotions to surface that might normally remain hidden. Someone

who is practiced at **holding space** knows that this can happen and will be prepared to hold it in a gentle, supportive, and nonjudgmental way. In [The Circle Way](#), we talk about “holding the rim” for people. The circle becomes the space where people feel safe enough to fall apart without fearing that this will leave them permanently broken or that they will be shamed by others in the room. Someone is always there to offer strength and courage. This is not easy work, and it is work that I continue to learn about as I host increasingly more challenging conversations. We cannot do it if we are overly emotional ourselves, if we haven’t done the hard work of looking into our own shadow, or if we don’t trust the people we are holding space for. Do this by showing up with tenderness, compassion, and confidence.

7. **Allow them to make different decisions and to have different experiences than you would.** Holding space is about respecting each person’s differences and recognizing that those differences may lead to them making choices that we would not make. Sometimes, for example, they make choices based on cultural norms that we can’t understand from within our own experience. When we hold space, we release control and we honor differences.
8. **Give people only as much information as they can handle.**

Holding space is not something that we can master overnight, or that can be adequately addressed in a list of tips like the ones I’ve just given. It’s a complex practice that evolves as we practice it, and it is unique to each person and each situation.

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Give good reason to trust their own intuition and wisdom.

Make them feel safe enough to fail.

Don't take their power away.

Learn how to recognize your own ego and keep it out of the circle. You can recognize it by the havoc it plays on holding space.

Create a container for complex emotions, fear, trauma, etc.

Give guidance and help with humility and thoughtfulness.

Allow them to make different decisions and to have different experiences than you would.

She gives great info about each of these. Read the whole thing here:

<http://heatherplett.com/2015/03/hold-space/>