

Steven Kessler, MFT

Psychotherapy and Counseling
Groups and Workshops
Lic. # MFT 23008
www.EFTTherapyCenter.com

1035 San Pablo Ave, Suite 9
Albany CA 94706
(510) 834-5399
Steven@EFTTherapyCenter.com

Holding Space for Someone

by Steven Kessler, MFT

© 2012

"Holding space" is a term that we use often in the healing professions, but often without a clear explanation of what we mean, and since your own capacity to hold space is so fundamental to your success in helping someone else digest their own experience and get to know them self, I'd like to take a few minutes to lay out my best understanding of what it takes to "hold space" for someone.

When you're interacting with someone else, there are three basic stances you can take regarding the purpose and the focus of this interaction. They are: 1- It's about me, 2- It's about them, and 3- It's about us. Let's take a look at each one in more detail.

1. It's about me. This interaction is about me. It is about my agenda, about me getting what I want, and the other person's job is to help me get what I want. It is not about them and their agenda. It's just about me. Right now, only my needs are important.

Typically, this is the sort of interaction you'll have when you go to see a therapist or other healer. You have hired them to help you get what you want. It is their job to put all their attention on you and help you get what you want.

2. It's about them. This is the same type of interaction, but the roles are reversed. Now you are in the position of the healer instead of the client. Your job is to make the interaction about them and their agenda, not about you and your agenda. You have to leave your agenda out of it and focus on them and their needs. For right now, your needs aren't important, only their needs are important. In order to be able to do this, you must be capable of tracking your own needs and your own agenda well enough to perceive how they are influencing your responses. This requires a high level of self awareness and skill in tracking your own inner experience. In addition, your needs must already be addressed well enough so that you are okay, at least for the moment, and you don't have to get anything for yourself.

3. It's about us. This kind of interaction is much more complicated, because now the wants and needs of both people are important. It's about both people's agendas at the same time. And those two agendas aren't always going to be the same. They may be different. They may even conflict. So the two of you have to do something entirely new: you have to negotiate with each other. You have to explore what each of you wants and how to get it until the two of you find some sort of compromise that is good enough for both of you. This process of negotiation and compromise introduces a whole new level of complexity into the interaction. Both of you must use communication skills that you didn't need in the first or second types of interaction.

By now, you've probably noticed several things about these three ways of interacting. For instance, #1 is pretty much the way a child sees the world, and rightly so. When we are very young, our

attention is usually limited to our own needs and wants. A big part of growing up is learning to shift our attention to include other people's needs and wants and make them important, too. You may also have noticed that being a good parent often calls on you to shift into stance #2 to help your child discover what they feel and want. And #3, of course, is the stance needed most of the time to make things go well in adult to adult relationships, especially in personal ones like friendship and romance.

"Holding space" for someone requires that you shift into stance #2 and stay there for the entire time you are holding space for them. For many of us, this can be very difficult to do, since we always have our own needs and wants going in the background, and they may say or do something that lights up one of our needs and brings it into the foreground. Managing that internally without losing focus on supporting the other person is the key to successfully holding space for them.

In order to succeed in managing your own inner state during this interaction, you must be grounded, centered, okay enough for the moment, and very skillful in self-awareness and self-tracking. And since you probably do have your own agenda concerning what the other person should do (most of us do), you must be able to truly put it aside in order to be present for them and support them in their agenda. If you believe that you already know what would be best for them, this is a very hard thing to do. If you believe that you can see a big enough picture to know where they are going and what route is the best one for them right now, it is difficult to resist trying to steer them toward that route. Personally, I find it very helpful to take a more modest view of my own vision and understanding, and instead to hold a deep conviction that I *don't* already know what is best for them, but that something in the other person is wise and does know where they are going and is taking them there by the best possible route, so that, even though I don't see how this is all going to work out for them, I can relax and trust the process and just support them in their agenda.

Holding space becomes even more difficult when you're trying to do it for someone who is personally important to you and has a big effect on you -- your lover, for instance. How well they are doing and what direction they are going probably has a huge impact on you and on the probable fulfillment of your own needs and wants. So you are that much more vulnerable to getting triggered and reactive while trying to hold space for them. This means that you have to be that much more grounded and centered and able to put your own agenda aside for the moment.

This is a very big task. I notice that, when couples come in for couple's counseling, this is usually where their connection and communication is breaking down. If the situation is that they can't even begin to hold space or negotiate with each other, then most likely their relationship has become an unending fight over who gets to go first. Or the situation may be that they are able to start to hold space and listen to each other, but then the listener pretty quickly gets triggered, goes into a reaction, and again, it turns into a fight. Typically, the conversation in my office goes something like this: one of them starts describing what upsets them in the relationship, but they get only a few sentences into it before the other can't hold their internal distress any longer and interrupts them, either to defend them self or to launch into describing what upsets them in the relationship. Within a few minutes, they have demonstrated how they get into the usual fight.

So what's the answer? What is the secret to being able to hold space for someone else, even when you get triggered? The secret is in developing the capacity to internally *hold space for yourself* at the same time, to have an adult part of you that can notice when a child part of you gets triggered and can step in to hold and soothe the child part inside, even while you continue holding space for someone else on the outside. This doesn't mean that you can tolerate an unlimited amount of internal upset. It only means that the adult inside can monitor the internal situation and can measure its own limits and gracefully call a time out while there is still some slack inside, before things inside go off the cliff and you switch into fear for your very survival. In real life, you might say something like this, "What you're saying is really important to me, and I want to be able to listen to all of it and help you sort it out, but I just hit a reaction inside that is more than I can easily hold and still give you the attention you deserve,

so I need to take a time out and go take care of this upset inside of me. I will come back and continue holding space for you as soon as I can. Is that okay?"

This is a tall order, to be sure, but it is possible. The key, I think, is accurately measuring how much slack you still have inside so you can predict *before you get there* when you will likely run out of space for the other person's upset. This means that you have to know yourself well and have done some of your own healing. You have to have taken enough of the charge out of your own usual automatic, overwhelming reactions that you can at least see them coming before they swamp you. You have to be able to perceive the small signals inside you that indicate you're going into distress and a big wave of emotion might be coming. And you have to pay attention to those small signals -- pretending that you are okay and ignoring your own self care won't help; when the wave hits, it will still swamp you.

Accurately measuring your own internal reserves requires a clear-eyed assessment of yourself, one that recognizes your limits as well as your talents. Noticing those small signals gives you some warning inside that your own emotional distress is building so you can gracefully call a time out and disengage before you go into overwhelm and reaction. It forewarns you so that you can both disengage from the other person in a caring way and take care of yourself. It lets you be pro-active in managing the problem, instead of reactive. It helps you take responsibility for yourself and your distress, rather than dumping it on the other person, the one you were trying to hold space for.

In summary, in order to hold space skillfully for someone else, you must --

- know the differences between stances #1, #2, and #3
- be able to shift into #2 at will
- track your own internal state
- manage your own internal state
- notice the small signals that you are going into distress
- proactively disengage before you go into reaction

I hope this article has helped you assess your own skill in holding space for others, and provided some ideas about how you can improve your skills and become masterful at it, if you aren't there already.