

A Collection of Guidance Skills and Suggestions for Yoga Therapists

Trust

Trust is a necessary requirement before someone can open up or buy into what you have to offer. Paying full attention to your client without judgement are essential conditions to elicit this condition. Also allowing the client to direct their own work and healing path at their own pace, with your support and sometimes guidance, is how you can best be of service in the yoga therapeutic relationship.

Rely on the Core Conditions

In order to implement the core conditions, which involve being nonjudgmental and reliable, attentive self-awareness is key. Things to consider are:

- Your own values, internal “rules”, assumptions about how things should go, imprints from past experiences and associations
- Your need to be liked, appreciated, regarded in a certain way
- Your own emotional triggers
- Your defense mechanisms against difficult feelings.

The four above points can take you off course as a guide and support as you find yourself involved in attending to and sorting through your own feeling responses and blind spots. Notice what you notice. If you are constantly being pulled off course, spend more time reflecting on your motivation to be a yoga therapist and to do healing work, on the triggering items in the client’s sharing, and on your own history and issues of concern.

For instance, you may love problem solving and are good at riddles and puzzles, and you may like to figure things out for your family members who express great appreciation. This can have great benefit if applied judiciously, however if you go on “automatic” deciding off the top of your head what is at the heart of the client’s problem and how to solve it, the client may be left feeling unheard, unseen, and disconnected from their own resources and disempowered. And many times, the initial “issue” is not the real or most significant issue but is the “tip of the iceberg.” Travel along the continuum of engagement and involve clients by educating, communicating, giving them things to consider and explore and eliciting their thoughts and solutions to their own dilemma whenever possible.

Practice Active Listening:

- Is a deliberate helping conversation with an understanding about confidentiality unlike everyday conversations.
- Has the intention of one person mainly responding to the other, in a purposeful, accepting, unbiased way. Normal conversations tend to consist of a less focused back and forth sharing of stories, and opinions.
- Usually intends to help the other person work toward an outcome, solution of goal.
- Uses a conscious discipline of putting aside one’s own preoccupations to concentrate as fully as possible on what the other person is expressing.

- Involves one person taking care to understand very accurately by double-checking at times, repeating at times, and possibly summarizing as necessary some of the content of the client's communication – all of which may feel a bit unnatural. For instance, reflecting on and drawing attention to aspects of what was said is unusual in normal conversation. Also, more silence on the part of the listening can be different as well.

Some Attributes of good listeners (or so I've been told):

- Opposite seated position or slightly away, leaning in, mirroring at times, slightly matching
- Facial expressions of engagement, following along, reacting appropriately
- Soft gaze, some eye contact
- Non-verbal encouragers, "mmms" and "aahhs", etc.
- Spoken words comment on what the client says, not introducing something entirely different
- Clarifying questions, questions about how to use the time, but not "How about those Jets?"
- Offer some solutions for client to try, but this is a collective decision, as they are not set in stone
- Allow client to say all or most of what is to be shared with a sense of care and time awareness.

Therapist Behaviors That Sometimes Get in the Way of Progress (Use Sparingly):

- Advising – like problem-solving, this is not a puzzle for you, it is their journey
- Being Right – putting this first is a never!
- Comparing – clients are not there to hear your comparisons with others
- Derailing – this can be due to discomfort with direction of conversation or just boredom, joking can be a way this is done
- Dreaming – pay attention!
- Filtering – commenting on what interests you
- Identifying – referring everything back to your own experience and stories
- Judging – this is similar to criticizing and name calling, "She's a big cry baby"
- Mind-reading – making assumptions about what people are "really" doing/thinking
- Placating – yes, ma'aming, based in wanting to be liked, may not be best for client
- Rehearsing – what to say next, calm down, breathe...it will come! 😊
- Sparring – debating with what someone says. Also one-upping

Self-reflection is a Powerful Guidance Tool

Being the ideal listener and guide is impossible, but it can be useful to reflect on what you yourself would find helpful in a therapeutic setting. Things like (these are mine):

- Empathy – has a sense of what I'm feeling
- Sincerity – is trustworthy, genuine
- Gentle & Good Humored - in challenging me with my assumptions, not guilt-trippy
- Respectful - period.

- Integrity - shows professionalism, meets deadlines, sends programs in timely way
- Humble – may be knowledgeable, in great shape or flexible, etc. but is not there to show off, but to support and help *me!*
- Fairness – on time, not moving appointment times, billing correctly, following good business practice
- Competent - offering of ideas, practices, suggestions, but is willing to modify based on my feedback and to try with me my own thoughts and ideas
- Assertive - enough to reliably state clear boundaries for his/er practice (time, cost, touch, etc.) so I don't have to worry about that (so I can get what I need).

Other Important Skills for Development

Communicate empathy by:

- Listening for feeling words and reflect them back: "I'm noticing you feel like ____." "That felt awful, huh?"
- Noticing how the client seems, like breathless, red-faced. Say what you see: "You seem angry. Tell me about it." You can also ask, "Are you sad?" "Did that hurt?"

Work Toward Using Open Questions and Limit Questioning

Questions are useful when they allow the client to elaborate and specify. More details and more description of what the client means can help both of you better understand. Sometimes as well, inquiry can help a client to uncover more of what s/he believes and truly feels about a situation. Open questions require some explanation and are not answered by a simple yes or no. They often begin with: how, what, when, who, where. Also inferences, making a statement with a questioning tone, such as "you were feeling frustrated?" can also move the narrative along without much interference.

Here are some other beginnings of tentative statements:

- It sounds as if . . .
- I get the sense/feeling that . . .
- Could it be that . . .
- I'm wondering if . . .
- Perhaps you're feeling . . .
- I'm not certain I understand, you . . .
- I get the impression that . . .
- I'm not sure I follow, do you mean . . .

Allow for Silence

Sometimes this makes us nervous, so we fill in often with disclosures about ourselves... "when I was a young man . . ." These are okay if they add to the client's narrative or illustrate a principle. They can be normalizing, or hope giving, "I got off beer drinking and you can too". Disclosure about how what they said affects us can be helpful to a degree. But allows for silence and speak about yourself only when you think it will be helpful. And in all cases, limit it!

Be Aware of Intense Feelings

Allowing client to get upset and cry involves finding a way to be okay with this happening. (Not “there, there stop that now.”) It is at these times it is important to stay present to your own feelings about how much of this you can manage and saying what your limits are before arriving at them. “I see that you’re very upset. I’m wondering if you’d like to stay with this for a few more minutes, then perhaps move to another aspect of your situation.”

Allowing the client to express is trickier. If you notice your client becoming angry, it can be helpful to name it. “I see you clenching your fist and frowning.” Then say what is next for you – I’m feeling concerned that you might not be witnessing yourself. Can you come back to witnessing?” If you feel at any time that your client is a danger to you, someone else or him/herself, stop whatever is happening. Say something like, “We need to stop. I’m not able to continue with this today. Then state your concern or concerns.” If there appears to be red flag behavior, take appropriate steps.

Set Real Life Boundaries

Set boundaries outside of appointment for the “do you have a minute” syndrome. Have some pat answers like, “I’m really sorry, I can see you are upset/in pain/curious about X/wanting to talk/etc. I don’t have time right now. Can we make an appointment?”

And watch email length. Sort answers are fine, “did you say to breathe in when I raise my arms?” “I’m doing fine but think 25 times is too many. Is it okay to do 15?” But when you get an email with many paragraphs with a tone that expects thoughtful response, let your client know you charge for remote appointments. Would they like to schedule one on Zoom or over the phone?

Take Care of Your Own Comfort

It is difficult to listen and provide guidance when your own basic needs are not met. Clear time and prepare the space. Set up. Be prepared to give your best. And do things to process what you are working on with your clients, give yourself down time, and take care of yourself.