

# COMMUNICATING SAFETY OR NON-SAFETY THROUGH THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE

## IN THE ENVIRONMENT

**Lighting** Does dim lighting trigger fear? Does bright lighting feel exposing, oppressive or even interrogational?

**Sounds** Are there competing sounds? What register do they appear in? Are they evocative of threat (high-pitched screech, low-pitched roar)?

**Distractions** Is there anything that is distracting attention away?

**Intrusions** Is someone likely to burst in? How to be sure not?

**Location** Are there threats outside the room, or outside the building? Is this a safe area? Is it safe in the building?

**Time of day** Does the time of day (for example, evening/night-time) have certain connotations, or may it trigger? What physiological stress demands are there at this time of day?

**Context** What is this place associated with? What feelings does it trigger?

**Familiarity -v- novelty** Same room, same time, same furniture, same routine? Or does the brain have to assess for threat each time because it changes?

**Entry and exit** Is it easy to escape if necessary? Is it shameful to walk past people to come in or leave? Is there a sense of being trapped in this room?

**Objects** Pictures, ornaments, décor — does it reflect value, or does it say worthless? Is anything inherently unsafe-feeling?

## NON-VERBALLY

**Breathing** Is your breathing normal and natural? Or is fast and shallow? Or slow and suffocating?

**Heart rate** Is your heart rate normal and natural? Or is it rapid and anxious? Or slow and sleepy?

**Posture** How are you sitting? Aggressive, face-on? Slumped, defeated? Bored, disinterested? Engaged, open, attentive, curious?

**Body attitude** Are you turning towards, or turning away? What message is your body giving out?

**Position** Are you too near, or too far away? Are you being asked to lean in, or give more space?

**Eye contact** Are you paying full attention with your eyes? Is it a threatening stare, a disinterested look, or a warm unthreatening gaze?

**Touch** Is touch welcome or unwelcome? How could welcome touch be safe and comforting, and communicate compassion?

**Clothing** What is your clothing saying about you? Is it distracting, suggestive, full of attitude? What effect does it have? Does it have any connotations?

**Vocal prosody** Does the pitch, rhythm, timbre, register and tone of your voice communicate safety, warmth and acceptance?

**Attention** Are you paying full attention with your whole body? Or are you demanding attention by talking?

**Hands** What are your hands doing? Are they fidgeting, distracting? Are they ready to give care if requested?

## VERBALLY

**Openness** Are you asking open questions? Are you genuinely curious about the answer? Or do you feel you already know what's going to be said?

**Explanations** Are you explaining and reframing to increase a sense of safety and security, or to show how clever and powerful you are?

**Reactions** Are you showing shock, disbelief, disgust, doubt, disapproval, shame? Or can you respond non-judgmentally and supportively?

**Engagement** Can you keep concentrating? Can you engage emotionally, with full open-heartedness, or are you being triggered by your own stuff and withdrawing?

**Respect** Are your responses respectful of the space and the boundaries between you, and the other person's autonomy, or are you being intrusive?

**Sound** Are you responding with non-verbal sounds and gestures to show that you're listening and are engaged? Or are you blank and unresponsive?

**Clarity** Are you communicating clearly what you mean? Or are you inscrutable, poker-playing? How can you be unambiguous to lower the sense of threat?

**Resonance** Is what you are saying true? Or are you trying to minimise pain, smooth things over, and dismiss reality? Are your responses resonant and can they be trusted?



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