

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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