



Heather L. Corwin

Can I Get a Witness?

A Healer's Most Needed Skill

By Heather L. Corwin, MFA, PhD, Clinical Psychologist

ABSTRACT Author and clinical psychologist Heather L. Corwin explores the concept of witnessing as a crucial skill that she applied in her former career as a Rolfer™, in her current clinical work, and in her personal relationships. Healthcare providers in particular benefit from developing witnessing as a skill, which involves observing, acknowledging, and giving meaning to experiences. Witnessing fosters self-awareness, emotional regulation, and deeper connections with others. Corwin discusses the role of mindfulness, presence, and intention in witnessing, highlighting their significance in therapeutic relationships in particular.

We make sense of the world by witnessing events and giving meaning to our experiences. This process is most evident in how we engage with others through work and social activities. Structural integration sessions, Rolf Movement® sessions, and embodied therapy sessions work well for clients not only because of the functional gains, it is also because of the relational aspect of the work. We witness.

As healthcare professionals, we hone our awareness of what draws our attention when working with others. Authenticity and integrity can aid in the effectiveness of witnessing, both in our personal lives as well as our professional lives. Having difficult conversations with our clients can be a part of doing a good job; some suggest that we begin this skill by having difficult conversations with ourselves. We must be able to speak about what is happening in the present moment, even if to do so is to introduce a pause. Honesty and awareness in

our witnessing, when combined, can enhance our satisfaction in both our personal and professional lives.

As a direct experience of witnessing, I invite you to take a moment to notice where you are right now as you read this. Embedded in this article are some meditative cues to ponder as you reflect on witnessing. Many of these will resemble techniques for becoming present in the moment. What I suggest is that we cultivate this mindful observer while working with our clients or socializing with someone in our personal lives. I invite you to witness the contact your body makes with your seat. Do you feel the support of the chair or sofa? Are you as comfortable as you can be? What adjustments do you want to make? Go into your inner space. What do you notice about your breathing? Is it deep or shallow? Does the rate of your breathing make you feel any kind of way? Stressed? Calm? What is foundational is how we witness the cues we are taking in and how we ascribe meaning to them.



Image by monkeybusinessinimages on istockphoto.com.

What I suggest is that we cultivate this mindful observer while working with our clients or socializing with someone in our personal lives. I invite you to witness the contact your body makes with your seat. . . . Go into your inner space.

When I witness myself, I find that I am most aware of my breath. If I feel I'm holding my breath at all, this alerts me to the fact that I am likely stressed and may want to find a moment to do a breathing exercise or take a walk. Green space is the reset button I adore the most! When I was a kid, we had a cabin on a lake, and I've never felt so at peace as I have when I was there. I call on this knowledge within myself when I know a person I'm working with requires witnessing of a triggering and difficult event. I combine this knowledge with the memory of unconditional love I experienced with my daughter when she was an infant. This does not mean I think of the person as a baby; I am reminded that triggers dysregulate our nervous system in ways that make emotional regulation challenging. By remaining regulated myself as I witness, I can help the person I am with tolerate the emotions through my nervous system. If I see that the other person is experiencing too much, too fast (such as fast talking, fast breathing, darting eyes, etc.), I can ask for a pause so we can tolerate the pace at which we share the information.

This is what I mean when I ask: Can I get a witness? This article explores the concept of witnessing, provides examples of how I conceptualize this idea, and discusses how we can utilize this skill to achieve balance in our lives as healthcare providers. Witnessing fosters literacy in ourselves and others, which can include vicarious learning, self-awareness that leads to self-acceptance, an understanding of the complexity of situations, and more. These pieces of knowledge can foster powerful connections with ourselves and others. In contrast, dysregulation and overwhelm can occur in all people, and understanding how we enter experiences can help us support our clients as they navigate challenging life terrain. To me, the witnessing skill is a fundamental element of the therapeutic relationship that builds trust, fosters connection, and makes our work so valuable to those who can experience being in a relationship with another person in a healthy dynamic.

Notice in your body what sensations are happening right now as you read this.

Pause to take a moment to have a few breath cycles and witness. Words have different intensities depending on our past experiences with them. What did you notice in your system as you read these ideas so far?

In my thirty-two years working with others as a psychologist and as a bodyworker, I would attribute witnessing as a foundation of successful connections. Witnessing is a generous act, and we must be able to balance our needs with those of our clients – or risk being sapped of all our energy. Nobody wants that.

Witnessing is taking note of what is happening, the quality of the moments, impressions of the events, and translating the information into memories. Witnessing can be an overlooked avenue to fostering life satisfaction, which is defined by the American Psychological Association as *the extent to which a person finds life rich, meaningful, full, or of high quality*. Even if we already have the belief that the work we do is a vocation or calling, witnessing can be a powerful way to deepen how we work. Witnessing ourselves can bring

richness to our personal lives at the end of the day, after hours of supporting others. Finding time to reflect on your day can help you find ways to work more effectively, for yourself and your clients.

For me, a necessary step to allow witnessing is to be able to be present, ideally to be able to acknowledge what is true. All my life, I have continued to refine my understanding of what makes life meaningful to me. Witnessing alone can and does provide me with a deeply profound and satisfying engagement with others, personally and professionally.

Witnessing allows me to foster awareness of what I need because the process allows me to slow things down to orient to the situation. A crucial element that supports witnessing actively in my work is accepting people for who they are, unconditionally. I apply the same kind of witnessing to my private life. This includes myself, my family, and when I'm out in public. This is an active practice for me because judgement can show up and get in the way of caring for others or myself. This reaching into the fabric of the moment to determine how I engage is satisfying to me and makes me feel vibrant and empowered.

Grace, Balance, and Presence

Grace is something that I can access through witnessing. Grace is allowing people, including myself, to be messy and human. Humans have imperfect reactions and big feelings. Grace recognizes that the person in front of me is flawed, as I am flawed. As a perfectionist, grace is not a usual first reaction for me; critical judgments can be first. Though being critical can be a helpful skill, it can get in the way of witnessing because witnessing is about chronicling information. Better yet, being able to name what is happening can be a healing way to engage because you are helping another person articulate their experience alongside your own.

In many ways, people in the caring professions engage in the service of witnessing, even if this is not a primary goal. As a young bodyworker, I thought I needed to give all my empathy and kindness to clients to help them facilitate health and well-being. While that might be naïve, I saw this as the key to supporting others. My intention was to offer some relief.

Intention is powerful because it gives context to how we engage.

Throughout my life, but especially in bodywork and psychology education, I was taught that the intention we have in the room is over 90% of the healing process. Intention defines the quality of our relationships. I also learned early on in my career that by giving so much to others, I had little left over for myself: I needed balance to achieve a healthy personal base. This brings me back to the importance of witnessing as a crucial skill.

The cornerstone of balance for witnessing lives in regulation of emotions. How I witness and monitor myself allows me to remain emotionally regulated and present with another person. This is especially important when others become dysregulated. In the same way that a child re-regulates emotions by being near or held by a regulated adult. Also called coregulation, the regulated person can help others traverse emotional landscapes that are triggering by remaining emotionally regulated, so that the triggered person can come back to a place of tolerance while in relationship with the regulated person, coregulating with them.

What have you noticed about your witnessing while reading? How is the state of your nervous system at this moment? Is it revving high? Or are you so relaxed

you could have a nap? If you can, take a moment to look around the space you are in. What colors do you see? What sounds fill the space? Are there objects you find pleasant to look at? As you do this, what do you notice about your nervous system state?

To coregulate with another person can be a choice, especially when the relationship is not as the caregiver of a child. As bodyworkers, we are not trained to regulate others' emotions. Nevertheless, we can recognize when a person becomes dysregulated because we will feel a pull at our own nervous system alerting us that something is off. Witnessing offers the opportunity to make choices. We can engage by coregulating with them. We can be nearby to allow the other person to manage their own regulation. We can offer regulation skills like breathing or being in the moment through engaging in senses, or many other options. Each instance of interaction will require consideration, which is best aided by pausing, listening, and witnessing. The old adage is 'time heals all wounds'. Time is a tool that, when used to help a person integrate past injuries or hurts, can be the difference between trauma (an event happening too fast) and resilience (the ability to pivot and adapt in a healthy way).

Balance is best supported when you witness what is happening, identify

Witnessing fosters literacy in ourselves and others, which can include vicarious learning, self-awareness that leads to self-acceptance, an understanding of the complexity of situations, and more. These pieces of knowledge can foster powerful connections with ourselves and others.



Heather Corwin: Grace is something that I can access through witnessing. Grace is allowing people, including myself, to be messy and human. Humans have imperfect reactions and big feelings. (Image by simonapilolla on istockphoto.com.)

options in the moment for yourself perhaps informed by the others in the room, and proceed to honor what you need. To remain able to coregulate others, a person must be able to access resources in the moment, to avoid becoming triggered or dysregulated. Triggered is another way of saying dysregulated and is not the same as having a big feeling. Big feelings can lead to dysregulation. You can hear a moving or disturbing story from another person, have big feelings, and remain emotionally stable without disassociating or having your nervous system activate, going into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn states.

Witnessing is a complicated process that seems deceptively simple. To witness requires being present, attentive, focused, and listening both inwardly and outwardly, and it often demands empathy, sympathy, or compassion. When we witness, we allow our humanity to echo with the experience of others. Carl Rogers, PhD (1902-1987), the American psychologist who created the person-centered humanistic approach, believed that witnessing others without judgment helps people become self-actualized. This means that being with someone as they articulate their experience supports them in a deeper knowing of themselves,

which fosters wholeness. I ascribe to this idea. By acknowledging who we are and how we operate, we can find ways to accept ourselves, develop our talents and potential, and evolve into our best selves.

Free to Make a Choice

A recent story about witnessing happened when I was on a cruise with my family, and it was time to disembark. We have a family member who requires assistance, and I was with them in the holding area of the ship where the people requiring assistance were told to wait. Since we were at the end of the cruise, people were tired and cranky. One woman was crankier than most. She did not require assistance, her partner did. She was able bodied and was easily walking over and through the masses to get to the other side of the room where she wanted to be, her partner was not able to do this. She was yelling at him across the room and telling people to make way, saying unkind mutterings under her breath. This embarrassed her partner, who was trying his best to make his way to her while managing a roller suitcase and a few other items either falling off his electric wheelchair or getting in the way for him to move.

A person in my group observed out loud, but quietly to me, that she was a terrible person because she was acting offensively. Through witnessing, I made a choice to assist.

When I got up to help the woman's partner, he was appreciative. I assisted him to cross the room, not because I was trying to teach anyone a lesson, but because I could see this woman was at the end of her rope and this was not going to go well if no one helped. When I got her partner to her, she looked at me, thanked me, and I could see her relief. I recognized her behavior because she does what I do when I'm stressed – get critical.

By witnessing a person act in a way I recognize, I gave some grace and empathy. I chose to do what I could do, which gave a little relief to everyone in that room, including the stressed out, crabby woman. I have learned my life satisfaction is better when I engage this way. This is one example of witnessing another – and I would have been fine had I made the choice to do nothing.

What does your witness notice about you now that you've read my example of witnessing a mildly difficult moment for another person? Has that had an effect on your breathing rate or heart rate? Simply notice what is happening without any attachment to changing it. To witness is to notice what is real.

Making Choices with Clients

When we are in relationship with another person, like when we are being their Rolfer™, we have agreed to work with them to aid them in more functional body mechanics. Strangers do not have an explicit agreement on how to engage. As bodyworkers, it is us who know the steps of doing the work. We have the spoken and unspoken boundaries or limits of how we work with someone. Expertise in witnessing can enable us to say what is true and challenging in a way that is therapeutic and supportive.

For example, when a presenting client has a medical diagnosis that impacts the direct health of their tissues, like diabetes can, you may want to explicitly state how you are going to work with the client in a way that is slower. This may not be a traditional approach, and so you want to acknowledge what is true and different. This might not be something you say out loud, but doing so

can make clear some factors that impact your ability to work together.

Transparency and honesty, even when people are irritated by the truth, tends to build trust. If the person doesn't like that you must adjust how you work because of their body's ability to tolerate the work, agreeing that perhaps the client should not pursue this type of therapy may be the best thing to do for both of you. Rolfing® work is not for everyone. Any given therapy is not for everyone.

A more common bodywork experience might be witnessing a place in the client's body that is not functioning well. We then may decide to work on that area to increase alignment and function. What sometimes gets in the way of our work is when we are told that the area is tender and cannot handle pressure. We observe the client's breakdown of structure and form, which informs how we proceed to approach their body. This approach includes deciding where to focus – on which part of the body, what pressure to apply, and utilizing ways to engage, including movement training. Ida Rolf, PhD (1896-1979), encouraged people to look at the structure from how it is functioning and aligned, in order to give more support where they're able to do so. We are continual problem solvers because we know there are many ways to create support for our clients.

Sometimes there are factors that can impede function that have little to do with physical ability. The shape our body takes as we walk, for instance, will inform our posture. Our posture will be heavily impacted by our idea of what we want (or don't want) to invite into our interactions with others. Let's say a client, a young woman who is self-conscious because she recently developed breasts. The attention she receives focuses on her maturing body, and she feels embarrassment and discomfort. She might curve her shoulders forward and hunch in an effort to ward off attention. Witnessing, noticing, and curiosity work together to help us determine what we do next. If the hunching of the young woman is why she has come to us for physical support, knowing the reason she is hunching, even if unconscious, would be useful. If a pattern is serving a need, the need does not go away. That need can be addressed by changing the way it is served. Our inner witness can have the curiosity to explore why patterns

exist and how to better create support, finding more appropriate possibilities.

We cannot save another person. As people seek to give relief to others, the idea of what it is 'to help' another person can be confusing. Trauma fragments how a person engages. We cannot carry the trauma of another. We cannot unload the trauma on the other person. Worse, we can retraumatize the other person if we move too fast when trauma is present in the work we do together. We can, most importantly, *be with another person.*

Follow one inbreath. Follow one outbreath. What has happened in your body, in your system? Now, what sensations do you feel? Allow an accurate impression of this moment to fill your awareness.

What are some things we can do? We can be with them to gently articulate and name some of the moments or feelings that the person recognizes as trauma. Trauma can visit in the moment when you are working together. In other words, if you're working on a person's sternum and they have a memory come up that is triggering, you pause to witness what is happening. How is your client breathing? How are you breathing? Are you feeling your nervous system activation in any way? Are you seeing your client behave in a way that suggests they are not present or tolerating the moment?

Haunting memories or trauma can be acknowledged and supported in tandem with other healthcare professionals. Remember, we are not alone as providers. Have people you can refer clients to in your community. Have people you can call if you have a challenge and seek guidance. Regardless, noticing that the client is not

able to be present or is triggered is the clearest way to know it is time to slow down, pause, witness, and orient; all may be useful skills in the moment. Orienting means recognizing and naming what is happening in the moment. By naming what you witness, you and your client can both understand what seems to be true in the present moment, possibly informed by the past.

'The more you know yourself, the more you forgive yourself.'

– attributed to Confucius

There is no 'fix' to trauma. In its core, trauma is an event that happens so quickly that it cannot be integrated into the person's body or experience. To integrate it means to take little pieces of it, therapeutically process it one step at a time, and to titrate bit by bit. Titrating is like the ride of a teeter totter – going back and forth between discomfort (a piece of the memory), and then go into resources (the warm, safe space with a person the client trusts) so that integration of the memory of the trauma can occur, to reduce the trauma. I make this sound easy, but it's not. As a bodyworker, we can stir up trauma at a pace that surprises both the client and the practitioner. Pausing is your best strategy when it comes to trauma states appearing in a session. Invite yourself and your client to come back to being present. Witness together.

When I am engaging as a psychologist with a client, I am practicing my witnessing continuously. This is important because I am monitoring myself to learn more about the landscape the client and I are creating around their experience, and remaining curious to see if we can both tolerate the

My body is my best gauge when it comes to hints about how to proceed in our work together. These witnessing clues are true and apply to both manual therapy and talk therapy.

landscape. If I notice that my heart starts to beat a little faster, I will ask for a pause and check in with the client because my body is letting me know that something is off. If I suddenly can't concentrate, I ask for a pause to listen more to my body's signals and see if I observe any signs in my client that indicate dysregulation. My body is my best gauge when it comes to hints about how to proceed in our work together. These witnessing clues are true and apply to both manual therapy and talk therapy.

If you feel you do not have a connection with your body and your witness, I encourage you to find ways to develop this personal relationship. Some ways to do this include journaling to foster hearing your inner voice, spending time, even as little as five minutes a day, sitting and following your movement impulses. The sensory awareness work of Charlotte Selver (1901-2003) can be an avenue to approach awareness and self-understanding. Movement work like the Feldenkrais Method® examines pre-movements, which can offer insight into expanding meaning of motion. Silent meditation can expand our relationship with time and thoughts. Visual arts can

make conscious what we often leave in the unconscious. Pick the avenues you like to engage in for self-learning and run with that! The best part is there is no wrong answer!

Developing your most important relationship, you with yourself, will make your life better in all other relationships. Your ability to know yourself will give you opportunities to foster balance in all areas of your life.

Aristotle is credited with saying, *Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom*. Witnessing will add depth to our relational moments, both alone and with others, and can foster the much-needed balance in our lives. By expanding how we engage with others, we open ourselves to discovering ways to establish and pursue healthy relationships that offer relief and healing.

Heather L. Corwin holds a PhD in clinical psychology with a somatic concentration from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology and an MFA in acting from Florida State University/Asolo Conservatory. Currently, Corwin is the director of a mental health and holistic wellness collective, Garden Health Group, and practices as a psychologist in River

Forest, Illinois. As an actor for over twenty years and a theatre arts professor at institutions such as Roosevelt University, Ashland University, and Pasadena City College, her research and work examine behavior through the lens of psychology, allowing the flaws of being human to unite us through creative expression. She is an author for a chapter in a book on Psychology and Stanislavski, linking somatic psychology and the Chekhov acting approach. Her book on mental health for actors with Routledge Publishing is due out in 2026. Corwin graduated as a Certified Rolfer; she is also a belly dancer, a talk therapist, married to the love of her life, mom to an energetic teen, and a fan of historical romance. To read more publications and learn more about her, visit GardenHealthGroup.com or HeatherC.com.

Keywords

witnessing; presence; self-awareness; emotional regulation; coregulation; mindfulness; therapeutic relationship; empathy; intention; balance. ■