

THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE IN A CHANGING WORLD



Peter Tallman, LCSW, CDC-I

Behavioral Health Director, Camai Community Health Center- Naknek, Alaska

Psychotherapist/Owner Snowbridge Wellness- Anchorage, Alaska

HOUSEKEEPING



- Introduction
- Terminology: “therapist” “BHA” “we” “our” “clients” “therapeutic” “helper” “helped”
- Content warning
- Invitation to connect with self here
- I invite you to take what connects *for you*... leave the rest behind



ASSUMPTIONS

- We too are human
- People are doing the best they can
- In the right conditions everyone can change and grow
- Hurt people hurt people
- Trauma is root of problem behaviors: causes disconnection with self and others
- Dysfunctional behaviors once served as protections in past
- Our job is not to fix or change others, but to create an environment where it's possible for them to change





**“THE OPPOSITE OF
ADDICTION IS NOT SOBRIETY;
THE OPPOSITE OF ADDICTION
IS CONNECTION.”**

— Johann Hari

SELF CHECK-IN...AM I FEELING



- Curious: open-minded, wanting more information, “a learner’s mindset”
- Compassionate: kind and understanding to our feelings
- Calm: feeling centered, grounded and peaceful
- Courageous: able to admit my fears, move toward things that are intimidating
- Confident: believing in myself, knowing my value and capabilities
- Creative: an energy of new ideas and self expression
- Connected: my inner parts are in relationship with each other





US AS AN INSTRUMENT OF HEALING





If you think you are
too small to make a
difference, try sleeping
with a mosquito.

D A L A I L A M A

I F O R H E R . C O M



GOALS FOR TODAY'S DISCUSSION

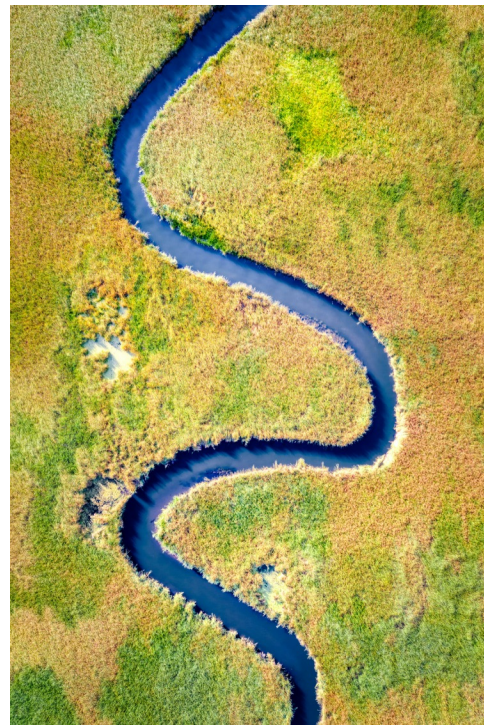


- Why therapeutic relationships heal
- Human connection and therapeutic presence
- Therapeutic presence as a tool for healing
- Technological and social change impacts on ability to be 'with' one another
- Risks with technological advances and fiscal disincentives to human connection
- Experience ways to foster increased therapeutic presence
- Optimism in humanity and unique assets rural Alaska can offer
- Activity?



MY INTEREST IN THE SUBJECT

- Profound respect and admiration for BHA work
- This perspective wasn't adequately taught to me
- Therapeutic connection and presence already large part of BHA work
- Market forces are at work in mental health
- Profound source of growth for clients and increase efficacy for me
- Trauma healing happens in context of a human relationship
- Experiences that reinforce importance of human connection
- Using the approach has helped my clients and been deeply meaningful to me



INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT



- A meaningful and authentic connection is healing
- Therapeutic presence is the path to establishing a healing authentic connection
- Embrace of technology has led to profound disconnection with ourselves and one another
- AI and other cost saving approaches will be pushed and prioritized for rural areas
- Rural Alaska always been an experiment grounds for cost savers e.g. telemedicine
- BHAs may be sole therapeutic human available
- Therapeutic presence is uniquely human





**IT'S THE CONNECTION
THAT HEALS!**



CONNECTION IS THE PATH



- Human beings are wired for relationships and relationships depend on connection
- Our brains, nervous systems, and sense of self all develop through connection
- Trauma: abuse, neglect, tragedy, abandonment- disconnection with self and others
- Trauma happens in context of relationships, so does healing
- Safe, attuned, and authentic relationships foster physiological, emotional and relational healing



PHYSIOLOGICAL HEALING



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- Co-regulation: nervous system mirroring with calm, grounded presence
- Neural rewiring: being 'seen' and 'accepted' activates new neural pathways
- Hormonal shifts: when in connection reduction of stress hormones e.g. cortisol and increase in bonding hormones e.g. oxytocin



CONNECTION CREATES A CORRECTIVE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

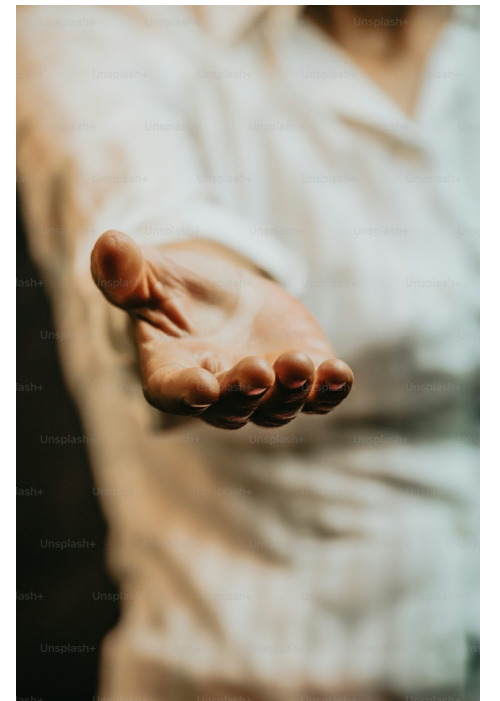
- Client problems result from betrayal, neglect, and pain
- Connection offers an emotionally corrective experience

“This time, someone stays. This time, I’m accepted.”

- Attunement repairs shame:

When client’s vulnerability is met with empathy (instead of judgment), shame begins to dissolve

- Client learns they can be seen and still be lovable through felt experience



A close-up portrait of Maya Angelou, an elderly Black woman with short, curly grey hair. She is looking directly at the camera with a gentle, contemplative expression. She is wearing a dark, ribbed top, a multi-strand pearl necklace, and a single pearl earring. The background is dark and out of focus.

PEOPLE WILL FORGET
WHAT YOU SAID.
PEOPLE WILL FORGET
WHAT YOU DID.
BUT PEOPLE WILL
NEVER FORGET HOW
YOU MADE THEM FEEL.

Maya Angelou



RELATIONAL HEALING



- Repatterning attachment: secure attachment — consistency, empathy, boundaries, and repair after rupture
- Over time, clients internalize this pattern, learning how to form healthier relationships
- Mutual presence: Healing happens when two people are with each other – not when one “fixes” the other
- The therapist’s authentic presence invites the client to also show up authentically



EXISTENTIAL & SPIRITUAL HEALING



- To be deeply seen and accepted touches fundamental longing for belonging, meaning, and purpose
- The therapeutic connection communicates:
“You are not alone in your suffering”





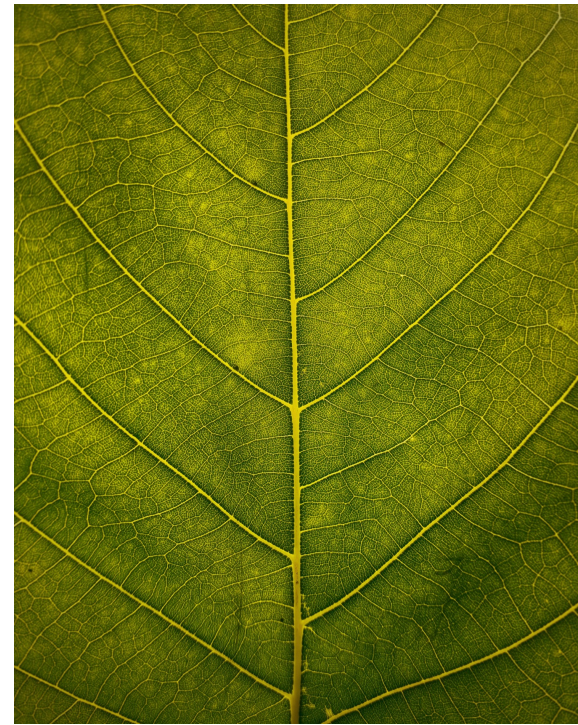
THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE: THE PATH TO CONNECTION

“Our brains are wired for connection, but trauma rewires them for protection. Healing rewires them back through connection.”

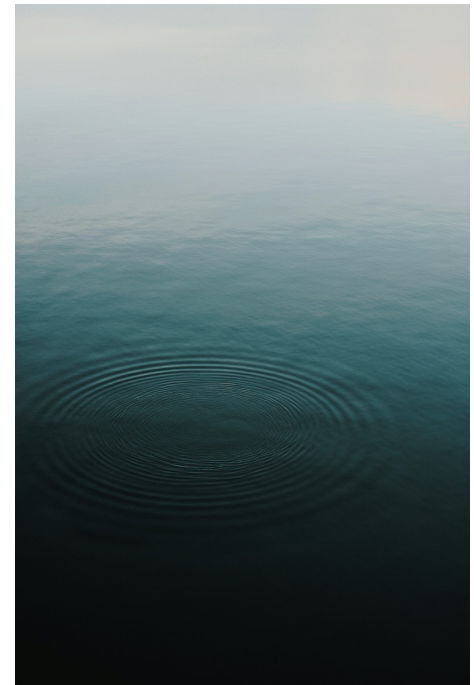
— Dr. Stephen Porges (Polyvagal Theory summary)

THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE

- Enhances safety and trust in the therapeutic relationship
- Deepens empathic attunement and understanding
- Allows clients to access deeper emotional material
- Strengthens therapeutic alliance, which predicts positive outcomes
- Supports the BHA's own regulation during intense sessions



THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE: THEORETICAL



- The quality of being fully with and for the client — emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually
- *A way of being* that allows the client to feel deeply seen, understood, and safe enough to explore their inner world
- “A state of being in which the therapist is fully in the moment, open and receptive, attuned to the client’s experience, and grounded in their own sense of being” (Geller & Greenberg (2002))



THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE: PRACTICAL

- Being present with client in the here and now
- The BHA is attentive, focused, and non-distracted
- Not thinking ahead to interventions, judgments, or outcomes
- Beyond simply “listening” or “empathizing”



KEY COMPONENTS OF PRESENCE

Grounded Self-Awareness

- The BHA is connected to their own body, breath, and feelings
- Awareness of personal reactions and boundaries

Attunement to the Client

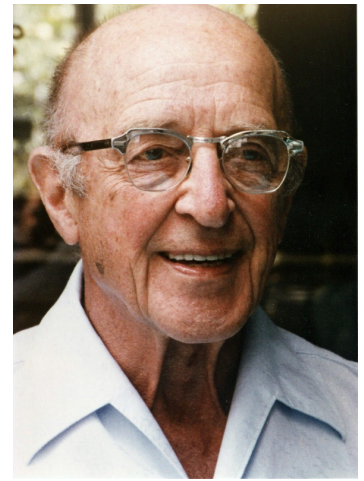
- Deeply sensing and resonating with the client's emotional state
- Empathic understanding without merging or losing self

Engagement in the Relationship

- Conveying warmth, acceptance, and genuine interest.
- The client feels “held” in the BHA's attention and compassion



IN CARL ROGERS' TERMS

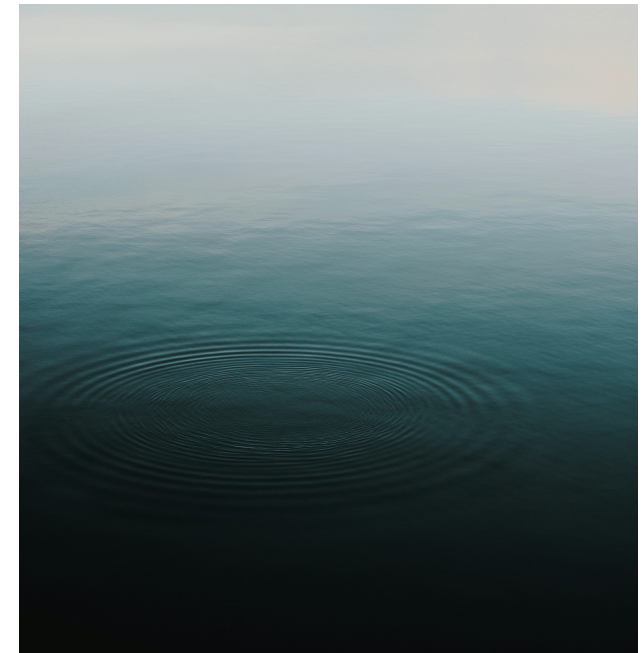


- Rogers describes a way of relating to oneself and others that fosters growth, authenticity, and compassion
- He believed that the most healing and transformative relationships are those grounded in genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard
- Therapeutic presence is a lived expression of
 - Congruence (authenticity)
 - Empathy (accurate attunement)
 - Unconditional positive regard



CULTIVATING THERAPEUTIC PRESENCE

- Mindfulness and grounding practices (breathwork, centering, body awareness)
- Self-reflection and supervision to notice emotional triggers or countertransference
- Intentional pausing before sessions to “arrive” emotionally and mentally
- Embodied listening — noticing tone, pace, and body sensations while engaging



BEFORE THE SESSION



Internal:

- The therapist takes a quiet moment to breathe, ground, and clear distractions
- “I let go of the previous session and center myself in this moment.”

External:

- Greets the client warmly, makes eye contact, and conveys readiness to listen
- “Take your time getting settled — it’s good to see you.”

Presence signal: Calm, steady energy that invites trust



DURING THE SESSION — LISTENING WITH THE WHOLE SELF

Internal:

- Helper tracks own sensations: noticing tension, openness, breath, emotions
- Stays curious about the client's experience rather than planning the next question

External:

- Open posture, gentle facial expressions, silence used intentionally
- Reflects back what is felt, not just what is said.

“As you talk about that moment, I notice your voice softens — what's happening for you right now?”

Presence signal: The client feels heard beneath their words.



WHEN THE CLIENT IS IN DEEP EMOTION

Internal:

- Therapist monitors their own emotional reactions and remains grounded
- Resists the impulse to fix, reassure, or move away from discomfort

External:

- Holds steady, compassionate eye contact; voice softens, tone slows
- Communicates safety and acceptance through body language
- “I’m right here with you. Let’s stay with what you’re feeling.”
- Presence signal: The client feels safe enough to go deeper.



WHEN THE BHA DOESN'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY

Internal:

- Recognizes their urge to fill silence but trusts that *being-with* is enough
- Observes thoughts or anxiety without letting them drive behavior

External:

- Could say: “I don’t have words right now, but I’m here — let’s just notice together”
- Silence becomes a shared, healing space instead of an absence



WHEN THE CLIENT SHIFTS OR INTEGRATES

Internal:

- Therapist feels the shift — a softening, a breath, a moment of clarity — and stays attuned
- Recognizes gratitude, relief, or connection, and allows it to be felt fully

External:

- Acknowledges the moment gently
- “Something just changed — do you feel that too?”
“That seems like an important realization.”
- The client feels seen not just cognitively, but emotionally and somatically



BHA Quality	What It Feels Like	What It Looks/Sounds Like
Grounded	Calm, steady, open	Relaxed posture, slow breath
Attuned	Emotionally connected	Reflective listening, “I hear you saying”
Accepting	Nonjudgmental curiosity	“Let’s stay with that feeling a bit longer.”
Authentic	Congruent, honest	“I’m feeling moved as you share this.”
Compassionate	Warm, empathic	Soothing tone, patient silence “You were really hurting”



IN CONCLUSION



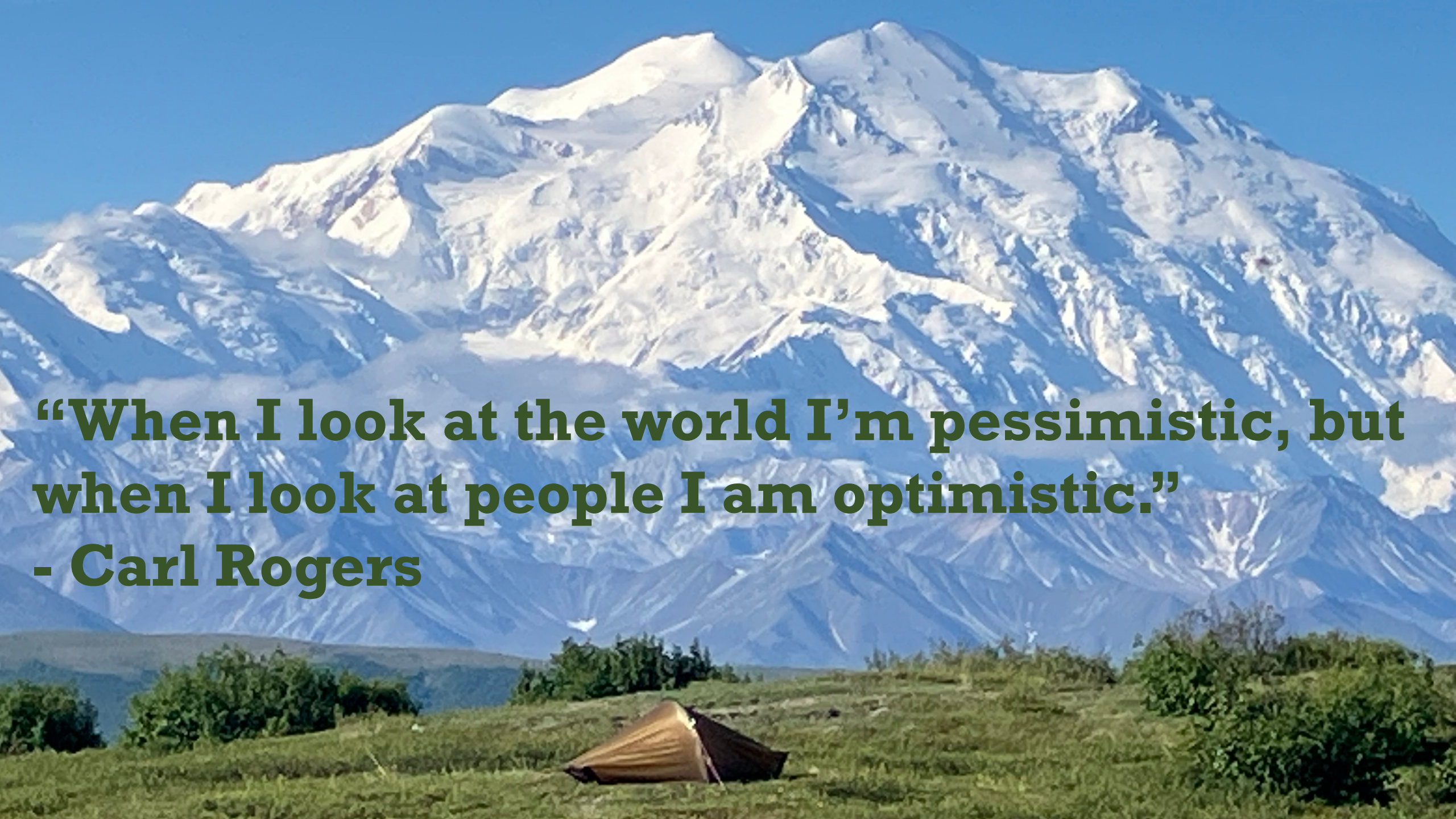
- Client wounds are rooted in disconnection with themselves and others
- A meaningful and authentic connection is healing
- Therapeutic presence is the path to establishing a healing authentic connection
- Therapeutic presence is less about ***what you do*** and more about ***how you are*** in the interaction
- Clients often describe feeling “met,” “seen,” “listened to” or “safe”
- Therapeutic presence isn’t about techniques — it’s about:
 - Stillness instead of solutions
 - Attunement instead of analysis
 - Connection instead of correction
- It’s the felt sense that the therapist is grounded, caring, and unafraid to be in the client’s emotional world — which allows healing to unfold naturally



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Carl Rogers- Humanistic Psychology
- Irvin Yalom- Existential Psychology
- Viktor Frankl- Logotherapy
- Tara Brach- Radical Acceptance
- Dick Schwartz- Internal Family Systems





**“When I look at the world I’m pessimistic, but
when I look at people I am optimistic.”**

- Carl Rogers

THANK YOU!

Peter Tallman, LCSW, CDC-I

peter@snowbridgewellness.com
(907) 202-9387

