

Compassionate Witness Dialogues

Compassionate witness dialogues (Drucker, 2013) invite individuals to see themselves, their situation, and their experience of therapy from a self-distanced and non-judgemental perspective. This 'vertical' form of dialogue can be particularly helpful if individuals become 'stuck' or overwhelmed during the process of therapy or chairwork, as well as being a useful means to conclude therapy sessions.

Process of dialogue:

1). The facilitator invites the individual to decentre from the unfolding interaction by standing.

Facilitator: "Let's look at what's happening from a different perspective. Please stand."

2). The facilitator emphasises the process of separating from the 'self' and the adoption of an observer perspective.

Facilitator: "As you stand, I'd like you leave Jacob in his chair and see what's occurring from an outside perspective."

3). The facilitator invites the individual to connect with their compassionate and non-judgemental self.

Facilitator: "Let's look at this situation from a place of understanding, care, and compassion."

4). The facilitator invites the individual-as-compassionate-witness to describe what has occurred or is occurring using non-judgemental language.

Facilitator: "Tell me what you notice as you look at Jacob in his seat (gestures to the client's empty chair) and his experience of this session."

5). The facilitator invites the individual-as-compassionate-witness to connect with and communicate self-directed empathy.

Facilitator: "In what ways does Jacob's experience make sense?"

6). The facilitator invites the individual-as-compassionate-witness to communicate any support, guidance, and appreciations.

Facilitator: “What help or support would you like to offer Jacob? What would you like him to know and understand about what’s occurred today? What do you appreciate about what he has done in this session?”

7). [Optional]. When used at the conclusion of sessions, the facilitator invites the individual-as-compassionate-witness to summarise key learning and “take home” messages.

Facilitator: “What do you feel is important for Jacob to take away from this session? How can you or he help ensure that he remembers that?”

Facilitation notes:

- It is important that the client is entirely decentred from their ‘experiencing self’ in order to fully enter into the witness state. Grounding the individual in their felt senses can assist the process of self-distancing (Facilitator: “Tell me five things you can see, hear, and feel?... Do you now feel separate from your experiencing self [gestures to the client’s empty chair]”).
- Doubling can also support the process of self-distancing and maintaining the witness perspective (Facilitator: “While I can feel my usual self-critical thoughts creeping back in now, I can set them aside and re-connect with a non-judgemental perspective”).
- Guided embodiment deepens the experience of the compassionate witness I-position. For more information on guided embodiment, see the Compassion Focused Therapy literature.

Further Reading:

Drucker, K. (2013). Psychodrama and the therapeutic spiral model in individual therapy. In K. Hudgins & F. Toscani, *Healing world trauma with the therapeutic spiral model: Psychodramatic stories from the frontlines* (pp. 225-237). London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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