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Open Awareness: Holding the Liminal Space in Transpersonal Coaching and Therapy

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ABSTRACT

"Holding The Space" is the metaphorical container for the therapeutic interaction between the coach or therapist and client. Although the held space is largely intuitive, transpersonal practitioners who wish to teach, apply and develop its practice are faced with the challenge of reproducing it consistently and intentionally.

Some important aspects of the held space include energetic resonance and rapport, a participatory perspective, mindfulness, intentionally cultivated attitudes of acceptance, compassion and interconnectedness, and induction of a state of awareness of wider perspective and receptivity.

We propose a unique mode of mindful perception ideally suited to Holding The Space, called "Open Awareness". The characteristics of this state are a mindful mode of perception; metacognitive introspective awareness; extrospective and somatic awareness; a reframe of personal identification leading to a sense of interconnectedness; and a fluid, dynamic balance between conscious focus and peripheral awareness. Open Awareness is simple enough to learn and apply quickly, and profound enough to evolve consciousness through regular practice. In general, the process begins with a shift of awareness to the physical senses, expansion and deepening to more subtle mental objects, and intentional resonance with the metaphorical space in between people and objects. The expansion of awareness is both inward (deep personal) and outward (interpersonal and transpersonal). Open Awareness is a distinct state, but shares characteristics with other disciplines such as Open Focus, Open Monitoring, Focused Attention meditation, and Focus-defocus practice.

We advocate Open Awareness as a useful tool for coaches and therapists and suggest research to develop further applications.

<u>KEYWORDS</u>

Holding the Space, Transpersonal Coaching, Transpersonal Therapy, Mindfulness, Open Awareness.

Open Awareness: Holding the Liminal Space in Transpersonal Coaching and Therapy

"Holding The Space" is the metaphorical container for the interaction between the coach or therapist and the client. It is a phenomenon commonly and anecdotally described by coaches, therapists, counsellors and healthcare practitioners in the caring and healing disciplines. This is especially true in the transpersonal setting. Despite the popularity of the term and wide anecdotal recognition of its importance, its character remains numinous and its description in the academic literature elusive. Although Holding The Space is largely experiential and intuitive, transpersonal practitioners, coaches and therapists are presented with a challenge: examining and describing this *space*, in order to research and teach it, develop the skill, and make it consistently reproducible in practice. In this paper, we explore the concept of Holding The Space, and then propose a simple yet effective method for facilitating the state in coaching and therapy. "Open Awareness" is a calm and receptive state of applied mindful awareness with aspects of introspective, extrospective and somatic awareness, accompanied by a sense of interconnectedness, compassion and a presence in the space-in-between (Dangeli, 2015).

The Nature of Holding the Space

The *held space* has been described as a liminal space that is open, receptive and emergent and that promotes transpersonal knowing (Dangeli, 2017). Liminal relates to a transitional process or something that occupies a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold (Liminal, n.d.). It is the co-created medium in which coaching or therapy is performed that facilitates exploration, discovery and healing in a safe and responsive setting. In transpersonal interventions, this includes the freedom to access altered states of consciousness; experience of the physical, emotional and spiritual self; the psyche's shadow; interpersonal dynamics; and perceptions of interconnectedness beyond one's self constructs. Components of Holding The Space include rapport and mutual resonance (Bandler & Grinder, 1976; Siegel, 2013), a participatory perspective (Ferrer & Sherman, 2011), mindfulness (Siegel 2010) and intentional attitudes such as unconditional acceptance and beneficence (Watson, 2004). In a coaching and therapy context, we propose to add a further dimension, namely a state of conscious awareness that moves the client as well as the coach or therapist away from a fixated tunnel awareness, to a state of openness, receptivity and equanimity.

The concept of *spiritual resonance* between the coach or therapist and their client is an important one for the transpersonal practitioner. In the therapeutic intervention there is an expanded awareness in which the boundaries between individuals and objects become more diffuse, ego identification is less prominent and a sense of mutuality between all things is fostered (Siegel, 2013). In the transpersonal context, this resonance allows a medium in which more subtle and abstract emotional and spiritual experiences can be detected, stabilized and explored toward integration and healing. One might consider this an "energetic joining" between client and practitioner (Siegel, 2013). A receptivity of this nature on the part of the practitioner is intuitive, but it is likely that the conditions for it to develop can be created through the induction of a specific state of awareness. A joint reciprocal state of awareness of this kind is the transpersonal equivalent of rapport originally described in other disciplines such as Neuro-Linguistic Programming (Bandler & Grinder, 1976). Rapport could be considered an unconscious empathetic relationship and the ability to relate to others in a way that creates trust and understanding (Overdurf & Silverthorn, 1995). Dr Jorge Ferrer's participatory vision of spirituality (Ferrer & Sherman, 2011) finds pragmatic application in the held space. Ferrer writes that "the participatory approach holds that human spirituality emerges from our cocreative participation in a dynamic and undetermined mystery or generative power of life, the cosmos and spirit" (2011, p2). The capacity to facilitate a dynamic setting in which this participatory vision finds manifestation is a core skill in both transpersonal coaching and therapy. The skill is one of intentional receptiveness and openness to an unfolding shared narrative on the personal, interpersonal and transpersonal levels. This merged and cocreative mode of interaction is an evolution of the traditional mechanistic relationship between practitioner and client. It allows multiple perspectives to contribute to the common therapeutic space, extending beyond the client and practitioner, to include other people, other entities and other dimensions of reality.

What is the role of mindfulness in Holding The Space? If we recognize that at least both the practitioner and client contribute to that dynamic space, and that the subtle resonance between practitioner, client and all the other entities in the space influence the outcome, how can the practitioner maintain an awareness of all those energetic factors? The answer may be in a particular type of mindfulness. Dan Siegel, referring to the role of mindfulness within the psychotherapeutic container, observes that:

Resonance makes two a part of one system, at least temporarily. Attuning to ourselves within mindful states, we have the observing and experiencing self in resonance. Attuning to others, we open ourselves to the profound adventure of linking two as part of one interactive whole (Siegel, 2010, p. 55). Mindfulness of what is happening inside the practitioner, inside the client, and in the co-created space in between them, may be the difference

between a random, chaotic or confounded outcome of a session, and a more facilitated, applied and useful outcome. The coach or therapist needs to be sensitive to the myriad of factors at play in the session, some preconscious, not all from the client only, many not obvious, and changing all the time. An attempt to track these factors cognitively is likely doomed to failure, whereas the mindful state allows a continuous, holistic intuitive processing through the active, non-judgmental moment-to-moment awareness of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Another aspect of Holding The Space is an intentional attitude of unconditional acceptance and beneficence. This dimension is a well recognized cornerstone of any therapeutic relationship in all branches of psychology, coaching and caring (Watson, 2004). Watson, writing in the context of the caring nursing relationship (2004), not only identifies this deep sense of compassion, but also explores the intentionality with which it needs to be cultivated by the practitioner. In the transpersonal context, this may find expression in certain meta-states that the coach or therapist enters and cultivates in order for them to become ingrained, intuitive and automatic, such as compassion and loving-kindness. By no accident, these are qualities valued by the contemplative traditions including meditation and mindfulness (Hanson, 2011). The intention of these qualities is not in forcing or pretending in a superficial way, but in purposefully participating in a process that allows access to these humanistic traits, and integrating them to prominence in the space.

In addition to the recognized qualities of the held space discussed above, we propose that developing a sense of interconnectedness not only enhances the therapeutic relationship and resonance, but in and of itself is a constructive intervention. Clients become clients because their attention is fixated in a narrow mode of perception and they have lost the capacity to grasp a balanced, wider and more holistic perspective. The client's thought and emotional patterns, as well as their experience of spirituality may be *locked into* a rigid set of preconceptions, triggers or ingrained habitual responses (Bandler & Grinder, 1976). We propose that this phenomenon is so common in coaching and therapeutic settings, that the faculty of Holding The Space needs to include a priori the facilitation of expanding the client's state of awareness.

Open Awareness: Holding the Liminal Space...

In summary, the important skill of "Holding the Space" in a transpersonal coaching and therapy setting has a number of components which include: 1) resonance and rapport; 2) a participatory vision; 3) mindfulness; 4) intentional attitudes of acceptance, compassion and loving-kindness; and 5) opening the *aperture* of one's awareness as an antidote to tunnel awareness. In the following section, we propose a methodology called "Open Awareness" for maintaining a state of awareness that includes all of these components.

The Nature of Open Awareness

Open Awareness is a distinct state of awareness characterized by Dangeli (2015):

- a mindful mode of perception
- a calm and receptive emotional and mental state
- metacognitive introspective awareness in which the mind can observe its own state and activities an awareness of the mind itself
- extrospective awareness heightened sensory and somatic perceptions
- a reframe of one's current experience of oneself, placing perceived phenomena within one's frame of reference (as opposed to these being experienced outside of oneself) leading to a sense of interconnection and compassion
- balance and adaptation between conscious focused attention and peripheral sensory awareness
- a flexible, fluid and dynamic state, enabling one to access a variety of channels of perception through intent and appropriateness to the current context

Open Awareness involves the intentional observation of one's thoughts, feelings and sensory perceptions in the present moment through opening the *aperture* of one's awareness. In addition to identifying the subtleties of one's internal experience, Open Awareness includes becoming receptive to the energetic and relational links between oneself and others and the environment. To varying degrees, the individual experiences a felt sense of expansiveness and interconnection resulting from disidentification from their limited self-concepts. Open Awareness is more than a technique, it is a natural mode of being that can be tapped into and intentionally cultivated. Someone in Open Awareness is non-reactive, equanimous, aware of inner and outer processes and has a deep sense of interconnectedness.

Open Awareness is often described as an expanded and receptive consciousness (Dangeli, 2015). There is a balance between cognition and intuition, between action and acceptance, and between the sensory and the conceptual. On a transpersonal level, the coach or therapist in Open Awareness intuitively taps into the dynamic space that is co-created by practitioner and client, and is receptive to subtle shifts in energy, facial expressions, body sensations, and other variables. Importantly, the practitioner is also sensitive to his or her own shadow reactions, and how those may be influencing the interaction.

We propose that the state of Open Awareness facilitates all the aspects of Holding The Space: resonance and rapport through a subtle and responsive awareness; a participatory vision through the sense of interconnectedness; a mindful presence; a sense of goodwill and compassion brought on by a unifying state of awareness; and a natural widening of one's perception of reality.

The How To of Open Awareness

As lofty as the desired state of Open Awareness appears, the state is easily attained through a basic methodology that can be taught and practiced. The methodology is simple enough to learn relatively quickly, and profound enough to allow an evolution of consciousness with deepened practice. There are various means to facilitate Open Awareness (see Tables 1 and 2 for examples). In general, the means begin by identifying one's present experience of self, by first focusing attention through the senses, then noticing mental objects such as thoughts and emotions, and then broadening awareness to the context and the container that allows for one's current experience. As Open Awareness expands, there is a widening mindful experience of the energetic field between objects and individuals. As Open Awareness deepens, one's experience of the space-in-between refines, the subject-object divide dissolves, and the more subtle realms come into awareness. There is a progression from an awareness of the concrete, fixed and separate, to an awareness of the subtle, dynamic and interconnected. In practice, the process of opening one's awareness typically begins with attention to the content of one's current sensory experience (e.g. visual, auditory, somatic), and then progresses to a more subtle background experience of the senses, a meta observation of mental objects (e.g. patterns of thoughts and emotions) with an intent to allow extension to a more energetic awareness of the space in-between everything. The expansion is

both inward (to the deep personal) and outward (to the interpersonal and transpersonal). In the context of coaching and therapy, clients are guided to embody the experience and root it in positive next step actions, behaviours and responses. Open Awareness can be both an open eye, conversational technique as well as a closed eye meditative practice. While this extending of awareness is imagined and therefore subjective, the object here is not to pretend that one is having any particular kind of experience, but rather to prime one's consciousness in order to bring forth more of what is already present in the background of awareness.

Open Awareness creates a highly present state that has numerous applications. It can have a profoundly healing or transformative effect on the individual who practices it regularly. It can serve as a constructive technique in coaching or therapeutic interventions, in addition to its previously described application in the context of Holding The Space for the client's emerging process (Dangeli, 2015). It can also be utilized as a tool for meditative insight and growth.

Open Awareness in Relation to Other Methodologies

The earliest tracings of Open Awareness appear to stem from Buddhist origins (Gunaratana, 1996) and it was possibly first introduced in the West through the teachings of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff in the early nineteen hundreds (Ouspensky, 1971). Aspects of Open Awareness have been integrated into some of the techniques of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) (Bandler & Grinder, 1976; Overdurf & Silverthorn, 1995) and other psychological interventions, although it has received only nominal attention from the mainstream scientific community (Farb, et al. 2007; Hanson, 2011). There are similarities to and differences between similar approaches such as Open Focus (Fehmi & Robbins, 2008), Open Monitoring, Focused Attention meditation (Lippelt, Hommel & Colzato, 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 2003), and Focus-defocus (Pillay, 2017).

Open Focus is the name of the attention training programme created by neuroscientist, Dr Lester Fehmi (Fehmi & Robbins, 2008). Fehmi showed through neurofeedback EEG readings that certain styles of attention promoted synchronous whole brain activity that may be associated with mental and physical wellbeing. His four attention styles theory identifies four combinations of two styles of attention: diffuse versus narrow (attention takes in the bigger picture versus focused on a single object) and objective versus immersed (dissociated observation versus more direct experience). His model supports Open Awareness in at least two important aspects. Firstly, he recognizes that it is the flexibility and movement between attention styles that is important. This controlled plasticity is also a feature of the Open Awareness state. Secondly, his proposed techniques for reaching the optimal attention style, similar to Open Awareness, utilize an experience of the perceived space between and within objects and the physical body (Fehmi & Robbins, 2008).

Although Open Awareness is not a meditation technique per se, it shares properties of awareness and attention with various forms of mindfulness meditation. These include Open Monitoring (Lippelt et al, 2014), and the complementary perception of the focused attention and peripheral awareness streams of awareness (Yates, 2015). The inherent mindfulness component of Open Awareness cultivates the ability to adapt and regulate one's thoughts, feelings and actions according to the situation. Rather than perceiving mental and emotional states as fixed, the mindful approach identifies their impermanent nature and treats them as transitory phenomena (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Williams & Teasdale, 2002). To note here is that Open Awareness is a functional and pragmatic approach designed for application in real life scenarios and within coaching and therapeutic sessions. In an important way, the Open Awareness approach incorporates salient elements of mindfulness, and applies them within both coaching and therapy frameworks. Mindfulness meditation however, often has a different goal, namely the attainment of enlightenment through insight and non-dual awareness (Yates, 2015).

Open Monitoring is a mindfulness approach wherein the focus of awareness becomes the monitoring of awareness itself. In contrast to focused attention meditation, no single object or experience is focused on, instead there is a non-judgmental, unattached moment-to-moment awareness of all mental objects and sensory experiences that are within the field of awareness (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Open Awareness harnesses a form of open monitoring, but also includes the potential to respond to objects in the awareness in an intuitive and appropriate way. An over-fixation into the attentive focused processing mode of awareness to the exclusion of a wider, less processed and unfocused mode has been identified as a barrier to growth and creativity: a focus-defocus imbalance (Pillay, 2017). Yates (2015) delineates the complementary different roles of attention and peripheral awareness (Table 3).

We propose that the nature of Open Awareness - with its incorporation of widening background awareness while maintaining conscious focusis ideal for facilitating the dynamic complementary relationship between attention and peripheral awareness. This facilitates the skill of the coach or therapist to be in an open, mindful space and simultaneously apply therapeutic strategies with both cognitive and intuitive elements.

Conclusion

Holding the liminal space is a core competency in transpersonal coaching and therapy. Facilitating the optimal setting for this work requires intuitive resonance and rapport, a participatory perspective, mindfulness, an accepting and compassionate attitude, and a shift in both practitioner and client from a narrow to an expanded state. The entering of the state of awareness with all these elements is a skill that can be learnt and practiced. One methodology for doing so is the Open Awareness technique. Open Awareness is a refined state of awareness with a mindful mode of perception, including both introspective and extrospective awareness, a sense of interconnectedness and compassion, and a dynamic balance between conscious attention and peripheral awareness.

We share our vision of making the simple and applied skills of Open Awareness available to transpersonal practitioners, coaches and therapists as a core skill as well as an adjunct to their existing methodology. We propose that Open Awareness is simple enough to be easily taught, and extensive enough to allow advanced applications within transpersonal coaching and therapeutic methodologies. Next steps include making the methodology more widely available, and exploring variations and further applications. There is also a need for research to investigate the effects and refine our understanding of the components. In order to do so, we have identified the need for a taxonomy model for states of awareness in a coaching or therapy setting, and a model to understand the outcomes that flow from the process, and innovative research methodology to investigate the link between the two.

Table 1

An abbreviated example of a general Open Awareness technique		
Keep your head facing forward and eyes open throughout the following		
6 steps:		
1.	Extend your visual field of awareness as far as possible to the left and right simultaneously.	
2.	Expand your field of awareness all around you and sense the entire volume of space that your whole body occupies.	
3.	Notice the pauses or space between your breaths (continue for at least 30 seconds).	
4.	Bring awareness into the space between you, all people and everything in the area.	
5.	Notice how your breath connects you to the unlimited and unifying space that we all share.	
6.	Observe your moment to moment experience from the perspective of space itself.	
End by focussing on your breath for at least 30 seconds.		

Table 2

AN EXAMPLE OF AN OPEN AWARENESS METHOD TO HOLD THE SPACE IN COACHING AND THERAPY

- 1. Start by focusing on the space between you and the other(s).
- 2. Access peripheral vision (180 degrees left and right).
- 3. Expand your field of awareness all around you and the other(s).
- 4. Sense the entire volume of space that your whole awareness occupies.
- 5. Notice how everything that you experience, including the other(s), is within the extended space of your awareness.
- 6. Have the intention to embrace and gently hold the other(s) within the space of your expanded awareness.
- 7. Bring into the space your intention to be of unconditional support and service to the other(s) who are being held in your open awareness.

End by focusing on your breath for at least 30 seconds.

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Table 3 The dynamic interaction between Attention and Peripheral Awareness (adapted from: Yates, 2015).

ATTENTION	Peripheral Awareness
Isolates and analyses experience	Observant from a holistic and contextual perspective
More processing, slower response	Less processing, quicker response
Selects information from awareness	Filters incoming information
Narrow, fixated, singular	Open, receptive, interconnected
Personal "self" centred	Self-other-relationship-context centred (objectivity)

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