

Holding space in the healing journey

By Dieula M. Previlon

I'm often asked why I became a counsellor, and the answer lies between the lines of what I'll be sharing here. I was born and raised in Haiti, then spent the remainder of my adolescent years in the United States. Growing up in between two vastly different worlds set the stage for me to be in desperate need of healing, making sense of my experiences and grappling with the question: who am I? I believe God held me during those years, helped me survive my circumstances and eventually created opportunities for me to enter the healing journey when I was ready.

A significant part of that journey had to do with the people that held space for me to process my pain and created safety for me to risk doing the healing work. I became a therapist to be a part of the transformation that takes place when you hold such space for others needing the same.

This article will give some basic definitions and examples of holding space that helps people heal. I will share how the posture of holding space is beneficial when counselling people of different cultures from the therapist. Lastly, I will conclude with insights on counselling through the integration of psychology and theology.

What is holding space?

Holding space is the ability to be present with clients without expressing feelings of being overwhelmed by the client's layered story, without showing inattentiveness while the client shares, or imposing a rushed pace to the healing process. It involves being a loving presence, communicating to the clients that they have the therapist's undivided attention. The posture of holding space

for clients communicates that the therapist has all the time in the world and they're not going anywhere, whatever traumatic stories are shared. Do you see how this posture can be profound to the traumatised on a healing journey?

We live in a microwave mentality society that often values quick fixes and instant solutions. The posture of holding space for clients can be a great challenge to therapists and clients alike. It is a skill counsellors need to continually develop and nurture. It is also a tenet of counselling to educate clients, as they often enter the counselling session

with preconceived notions that healing will be instantaneous, a quick fix. Clients need to learn that they need space and time to heal authentically.

Overcoming the challenges

As a supervisor, two of the most common challenges I often hear from newer therapists are: running out of creative ideas to hold space for clients and managing the tension of being curious without retraumatizing clients. With these challenges, you

can almost feel the anxiety of needing to perform perfectly in the therapeutic space. The reality is new shoes as a therapist will take some time to fit comfortably. It is important to remember that the counselling space offers grace for all present, and that grace extends to therapists. The posture of love and kindness in the therapeutic space translates to both client and therapist. For counselling to have the most impact on clients, a therapeutic relationship must be developed. And in every relationship, there needs to be genuine trust and respect developed.

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The delicate issue of retraumatisation cannot be overlooked. Sensitivity to trauma and the balance between respecting a client's resilience and guiding them through healing are essential aspects of quality counselling. To mitigate the fear of retraumatising clients, there is a need to foster a supportive and secure environment where counsellors empower clients to navigate their pain and suffering with courage at their own pace. Knowing they are not alone in their journey towards healing will be of great benefit to both counsellor and client.

Newer therapists might be apprehensive about managing conflict or tension in the therapeutic space. It's good to feel equipped and prepared to respond therapeutically when clients in many and various ways indicate that the pace is wrong, there is gap in the therapist's understanding of what they are trying to communicate, and/or they are simply not ready to go deeper. Trust the client's pace, and attune to the signals that indicate that they are ready to manage the tension and triggers of going deeper.

Navigating issues of diversity

Holding space well for clients also benefits counsellors navigating issues of diversity in the therapeutic space. Today's counsellors must think globally and expansively when it comes to posture in counselling as they embrace diversity and foster inclusion in their practice. Therapists are often met with two great challenges in being proficient in counselling clients from a racial and ethnic

group that are different from them: the fear of not knowing enough and the fear of offending clients as they seek to understand groups different from their own.

The reality is counsellors are already doing the work of understanding a client's context when they show up in counselling. Whether or not the therapist and client are of the same race, the work of understanding a client's background and history is necessary work that will aid in creating treatment plans that will help them make progress toward healing. So, therapists need to continue to be curious, asking inquisitive questions to understand a client's context.





Taking it a step further, when it comes to issues of race, diversity and inclusion we live in the best times to learn and grow. There are podcasts, YouTube channels, books, shows and influencers who make it their life's purpose to teach those with a desire to learn. All these pathways will aid in growing proficient in understanding the general issues of bias, microaggression, racism and sexism. Devoting yourself to being a student of the world is the best posture. The counselling space should not be the place to learn that racism, sexism and issues within the LGBTQIA+ community exist all over the world.

When you enter the counselling room, there's no need to pretend that you've mastered the subject of diversity and inclusion, nor should you pretend you fully understand the struggle your clients go through every day – because you don't. The counselling room should be the place you learn how your client's unique life is impacted by those issues so you can help them create a path toward wellness and hope. Of course, you will not be proficient on all the issues,

no one is, but the awareness of the existence of inequalities that prevent certain groups to flourish helps build trust.

I remember years ago I was reeling from the sudden passing of my brother, and I was in need of a grief therapist. I reached out to a white woman

therapist because I knew she would be well versed in dealing with grief and trauma. I also knew I could trust my grief with her because she had done extensive education on systematic issues that plagued members of American society – especially black women (I watched how she engaged online). She not only helped me process my grief, when issues of racism and sexism would arise she was fully present, created space for me, showed compassion and helped me move toward rest and ease.

Acknowledging and honouring cultural diversity enhances the therapeutic process, helping counsellors become more attuned to the unique needs and perspectives of their clients. Fear of offending or making missteps regarding sensitive cultural topics is a common

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concern, but approaching these conversations with openness, humility and a desire to learn can create a safe space for exploring the richness and complexity of diversity. It is also important to be aware that there are times in the therapeutic space when you might not be enough for your clients. So, it's important to have a diverse referral list that you can either refer to or tag team with.

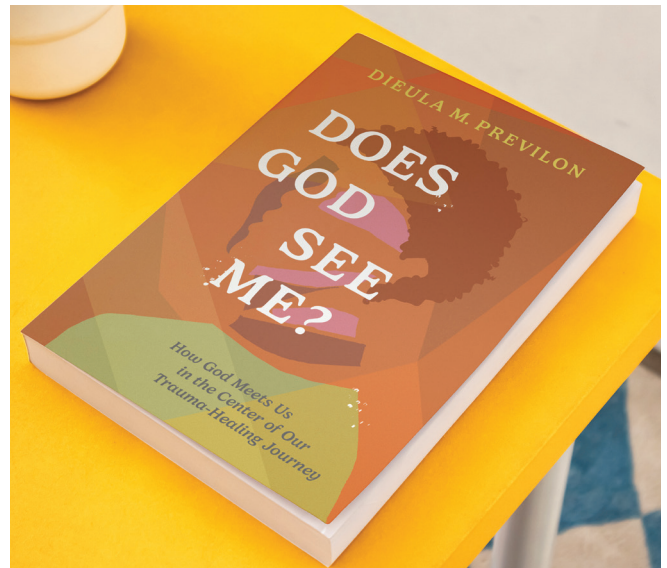
By actively engaging with cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, Christian counsellors can enrich their practice, build stronger connections with clients from diverse backgrounds and contribute to the nurturing of a supportive and respectful therapeutic environment.

Integrating psychology and theology

As a therapist, I would hope that I hold space well for clients of all genders, race and sexual orientation because of my identity as a follower of Christ, which allows me to offer grace, love and compassion. When we do show up with love, grace and compassion, integrating theology and psychology, it forms the foundational framework of good Christian counselling, offering a holistic approach to healing that encompasses spiritual, emotional and psychological facets of human existence.

Holding space is not simply a psychological technique; it's also a theological posture. When people are processing God's movement in their stories, whether they say the name of God or not, God is present holding space as they process and so are we as therapists. When they're trying to find the courage to take the next step in their lives, we often give them therapeutic strategies to do so, but as Christian therapists we believe people making decisions to live new lives is sacred work. The synergy between theology and psychology provides clients with avenues to explore spiritual questions, ethical dilemmas and psychological struggles within the context of their faith (if they wish to). Christian counsellors can assist clients in integrating their beliefs, values and spiritual practices into their healing process, fostering a sense of purpose, coherence and optimism amid adversity.

I often meet with clients who are navigating issues of trauma caused by a religious institution or leader. Some specifically seek me out because I have been intentional about my integration work and clients respect me for being able to stand in the gap with them. This is often the space where clients engage in some of the most healing work they have ever done, as they are able to express anger, sadness, feelings of betrayal and loss without being met with



judgement. Holding space at this juncture in their lives is often what preserves their relationship with God and helps them to seek healthier Christian communities to grow spiritually.

The therapeutic space is a sacred space. We have the wherewithal to stimulate hope and healing for individuals seeking solace and restoration amid life's trials. By actively engaging with the principles of holding space for healing, embracing diversity and inclusion, and integrating theology and psychology, Christian counsellors can navigate the complexities in the therapeutic space with confidence, empathy and grace.



About the author

Dieula Magalie Previlon is a counsellor in private practice and an ordained minister in the US. Her professional career in counselling, coaching, pastoring and international ministry spans over 20 years. She is also the founder and executive director of ElevateHer International Ministries. She has authored *Does God See Me?: How God meets us in the center of our trauma-healing journey* (NavPress). Learn more at www.dieulaprevilon.com