

Being a Compassionate Witness

The term “compassionate witness” is often used by therapists, especially when working with those suffering trauma and prolonged distress. Here, we reflect on how you, as a coach, can become a compassionate witness for those clients who sit across from you and have some level of diminished confidence or even loss of hope. Being a compassionate witness is the ability to *be* with someone, regardless of their emotions or internal state, without judgment, and equally important, without becoming distressed yourself.

Your clients may be nearly demoralized, anticipating that some help is on the way. Their initial internal questions might be, “Can I trust this person?”; “Will I be heard and understood?”; or “Will I be judged and blamed for my problems?” The question for you is, how can you *be* with your client without entering into judgment (evaluating their past) or the fix-it zone (repairing their future)?

Being a compassionate witness is a two-way connection; the benefits go both ways. First, witness yourself, notice your feelings, and what your body sensations are telling you. This allows you to regulate your own emotions so you can fully listen to your client. As coaches, we develop and habitually engage in mind-body practices so we can stay tuned and monitor our sensations, thoughts, and emotions. Simply acknowledging your clients’ distress and expressing a desire to support them can build a bridge of safety and scaffold a way for their confidence to grow.

Of course, this is not all you will do, but with clients with low confidence, taking time to engage is an essential first step. Based on Ragone and Seaborne’s (2016) list of best practices for being a compassionate witness, we have compiled our own list of practices that align with MI-consistent coaching. Parenthetical comments show related NBHWC core competencies for coaching with MI (see the link to NBHWC that we have provided at www.guilford.com/lanier-materials).

MI-consistent best practices for being a compassionate witness are as follows:

Do This

Listen without fixing. (Show empathy, and unconditional positive regard, honor autonomy, use silence and pauses.)

Be curious. (Without assumptions, listen for what is not said, be attentive, open-minded.)

Drop your agenda. (Clients are experts on their lives and are resourceful.)

Trust the process. (Convey the belief that the client is capable. Trust that clients can solve problems [with your guidance] through self-discovery, learning, and insight.)

Hold space for their process. (Foster self-compassion, acknowledge their emotions, and have the client describe emotions when appropriate.)

Acknowledge you understood them. (Express compassion, name and reflect their values and beliefs, and their current dilemma.)

Have boundaries. (Regulate your response.)

Awareness of your own state. (Be calm, present, and emotionally available.)

Avoid That!

Fixing, minimizing, or “You shoulds.”

Advising, assuming, or blaming.

Being solutions-oriented.

Fixing or rushing to solve. Working to get clients to see your perspective.

Avoiding emotions, offering sympathy, interrupting, or talking without pauses.

Focusing on the change goal and forgetting about the *who*.

Becoming overly emotional yourself.

Neglecting mind-body practices that foster your presence for the client.