

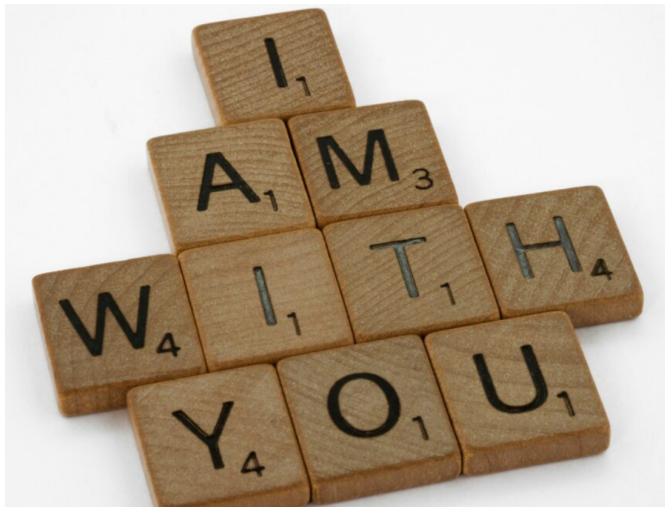
## Being fully present

This post is about supporting overwhelmed, fearful and often overworked people. Not through offering an expert opinion or providing solutions, but rather by being present.

Few of us are schooled in knowing what being present means, when it's beneficial and how to practise it successfully. Being present is not passive or soft, but an intentional noticing that requires effort and deliberate focus. It's recognising the need to feel felt, not fixed.

### What being present means

Traditional leadership responses involve offering advice, leaping to solutions or minimising feelings.



Being present is different. It's when we set aside our inclination to critique, plan and rescue.

It's when we are with another and not doing anything for them.

When we remain calm enough to deeply notice, actively listen, hear the unspoken and signal our unconditional acceptance: *I hear you. I understand you. You are safe here.*

To be there fully, we must use eye contact, body language, and our own inner stillness to understand another's experience by withholding our perspective and conveying support.

It's about creating a safe space where a person feels seen, cared for, heard, and valued.

In this way, presence can dramatically shift how people perceive and respond to distressing situations. Moving them out of a survival state into a state of connection and commitment

### Why being present is important

Being present helps a person feel anchored. It builds trust and encourages openness and the sharing of thoughts and feelings. Feeling isolated and lonely changes to a sense of warm belonging.

It builds stronger relationships, deepens connections, and enhances communication.

When people see that you genuinely care about their emotional well-being, they become more engaged and happier. They are more inclined to put in their discretionary effort, perform at a high level, collaborate with others and remain loyal to the organisation.

Presence is a learned form of mindfulness that requires self-awareness and emotional regulation. It empowers one to exert influence and enable positive change.

### Why we struggle with being present

If being present is free and widely accessible, why don't we practise it? Several factors get in the way:

1. *Lack of role models.* Many of us have never experienced deep, non-judgmental listening from authority figures. So, we don't naturally offer it to others.
2. *Instinctive problem-solving.* We are trained to fix problems and believe this is a large part of our job. The truth is that people need support before they need solutions.
3. *Being time poor.* We erroneously believe being present is a distraction and delays getting work done.
4. *Burnout.* We can't be present for others if we are trapped in our own chronic stress. Unrelenting workloads and personal traumas keep us in states of flight, fight and freeze with little or no capacity for others.

5. *Digital communication.* Emails and SMSs remove the sensory cues of feelings that make being present possible. Words alone don't convey presence.

Another reason we struggle to be present is that we may not know *when* to be present. The ideal time is in one-on-one face-to-face conversations when you sense the other person is flooded and overwhelmed by frustration, fear, anxiety or sadness.

Or conversely, when they are emotionally flat, numb or checked out. Often, the body will know what's going on before the mind does. You may notice palpable changes in behaviour.

Avoid trying to be present over SMS, email or Slack. In-person or video are always best. Our nervous systems rely on facial expressions, voice tones, posture and hand gestures. Without these cues, your efforts to be present can easily misfire.

And remember, not every conversation requires being present. If a person needs tactical input, a plan or feedback related to a task, it's best to focus on solutions.

Presence is a hard-to-describe feeling state. But we know it when we experience it.

*The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved.  
It simply wants to be witnessed — to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is.  
Parker Palmer*

## **Acknowledgement**

In preparing this post, I have drawn on the work of Lisa Zircami and Stella Grizont published in the Harvard Business Review, May 2025.