

Being Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable



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Have you ever wondered what could happen if you could stay comfortable with being uncomfortable? Resisting the urge to fix. Being cool with ambiguity and not knowing what will happen. Allowing people you care about to try things out and explore their own solutions. Trusting them and helping them by giving them space to find their own answers. Giving advice sparingly (if at all) and phrasing it so it is helpful to them.

And particularly in situations where it is tough. Where emotions are at play. Where there is risk. Where choices will be about health, relationships, careers and so forth. I am talking about situations that create a compelling urge to step in, to fix or rescue in order to make things better because as a good parent, family member, friend or human this is what we want to do for others, because we love them and want the best for them.

Visualise a situation where you are able to support someone you really love by giving them the space to explore their own solution. You feel calm, curious and excited as you know that person has all the gifts and abilities to deal with whatever issue they need to deal with. You are present. You listen with intent and curiosity. You realise how much you can support that person in making their unique decision and navigating the complexity of their own very special life. Your relationship with that person is one of equals, exciting and full of love and care. And you feel good about yourself and full of excitement for the person you love or care about.

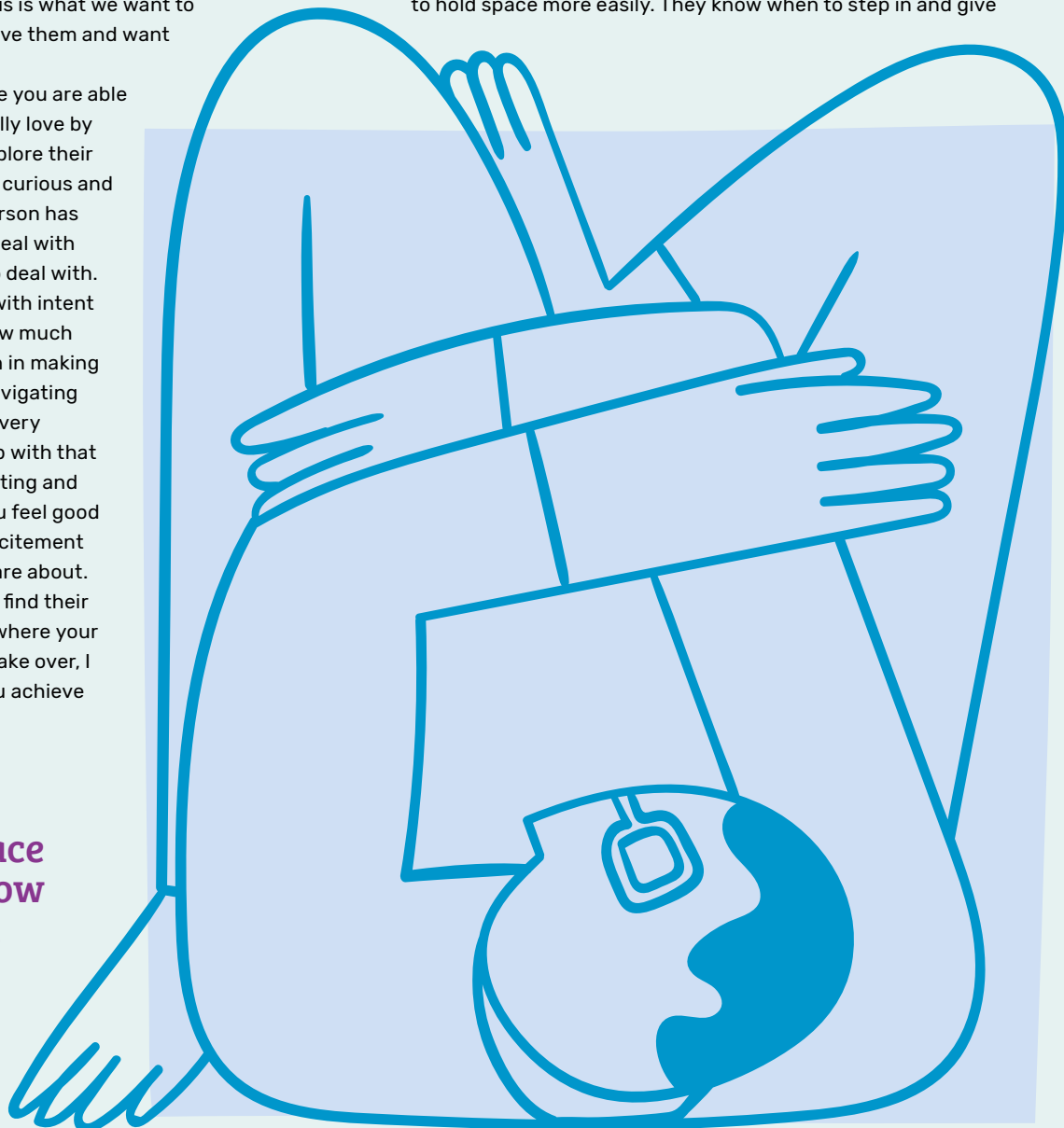
If you want to help people find their own solutions in situations where your emotions are high and can take over, I hope this model will help you achieve that.

People who are able to hold space more easily know when to step in and give more direct support and when to listen.

How this model came to life

The motivation behind this model stems from feedback from my adult children. They told me that sometimes they need me to be 'just mum'. They said that whilst they know my advice is motivated by my love for them and my intent to help them, they sometimes need me to just listen and affirm. They welcome my experience and want to benefit from it. They want me to give advice more sparingly – and only when I have listened to their ideas. They don't expect me to guide them, although they value my life experience and want to tap into it – yet on their terms. They said this would make our relationship more equal. More adult to adult.

I have observed my partner and some friends who are able to hold space more easily. They know when to step in and give



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more direct support and when to listen. They talk sparingly and listen a lot. And they do this with ease and calmness, with a deep appreciation of the experience and skills others have, and a deep conviction that everyone needs to navigate their own map of life. I was curious to find out how they did this and what I could model.

I am an extrovert, the oldest child and was taught to take responsibility. I take ownership and love being the person who solves problems, fixes and makes things happen. I do this because I care about others. This was expected of me, and it has served me well in my professional career. I progressed quickly into management and leadership roles. I also have a deep conviction of supporting others and sharing my experience and ideas. This is what I do in my current role. I have read and embraced all the management theory about distributed leadership. My high extraversion and the drive to help others can be overwhelming. And when it is emotional and with people very close to me, this can become a self-enforcing spiral and I just can't help myself. I step in. I do. I fix. I alienate others in the process.

I know this behaviour is counterproductive and is letting me down. I waste energy on being anxious about a situation that isn't mine to be anxious about. And this gets in the way of helping people in a way that is helpful to them and in which I could share my experience.

So, how can I stay comfortable with being uncomfortable, helping others find their own solutions with ease, curiosity and kindness, discerning when I need to step in?

This is where my model comes in.

Outcomes for using this model

How will you know you are using the model successfully?

- You know whether a situation requires stepping in because you need to protect vulnerable people from harm. This can happen but is rare.
- You feel calm, curious, hopeful and with deep connection to a person who is going through a tough time.
- You experience a feeling of respect and trust in the person and

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- ▶ their abilities to deal with anything that comes their way.
- You see the person and their wisdom, experience, talents and skills.
- You see yourself absorbed in listening deeply, finding out things you would never have found out before.
- When speaking, you question softly and with the intent to explore, add perspective, with curiosity, kindness and humour.
- You gain new insights that will help you live a better life.
- You have a deep sense of enjoyment from 'just being mum' (or dad, auntie, sister, friend...), listening and unashamedly taking the side of your child 100% – free from expectations of you or others to fix things and in the knowledge that there is a purpose for everything.
- You have a deep connection and bond whilst being free.

Finding the model

I met with three exemplars I know well, whom I had observed doing this well. The similarities that emerged throughout our discussions were:

They have an overwhelming ability to see what is good in people. They are interested and curious about people and their unique abilities to navigate their lives.

They hold a deep-seated belief that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers to problems or situations and that situations can rarely be 'fixed', but solutions will emerge that might be better or worse. They believe strongly that they do not have the right to make decisions for people they care about. And that they do not know better. And, as parents or friends, that they gave all they could give for their child to make good decisions for themselves. And, because of that, they can stay with discomfort.

They listen deeply with all their might and with kindness, curiosity and empathy.

They have an ability to mentally step away from situations and ask themselves "What would be helpful now?" and, by doing this, they can emotionally 'let go'. When it is emotional, they can metaphorically get off the rollercoaster and see it for what it is.

They all use a physical trigger to enable them to mentally 'step away' from situations.

They hold deep convictions that everyone has to live their own unique life.

The steps of the model

When you are with a person you deeply care about and you are seeing or hearing about a situation that is giving you a sense of discomfort, for example a queasy feeling in your tummy:

- 1 Recall a situation where that person dealt with a situation really well, where they were resilient and resourceful and found a solution to something. Remember this situation as an image, a sound or a feeling and really embody it. [Vir, Air or Ki]



- 2 Shift your body weight so you are slightly tilted and out of balance. [Ke] You are focusing on the person you are with and noticing their resourcefulness.
- 3 Connect the feeling of discomfort or queasiness with the image, sound or feeling of the loved one being resilient and resourceful and finding a solution to something challenging. [Ki]
- 4 Make that image, sound or feeling very big, loud and exciting. [Vc, Ac or Ki]
- 5 Let the queasiness dissipate into a feeling of excitement about the solution that you can help create and deep love for the person who will find their solution. [Ki]
- 6 Remind yourself: "Holding space is all that is required now." [Aid]
- 7 Run a safeguarding check by asking yourself if there is immediate danger of harm. If there is, intervene. [Aid] [Exit]
- 8 If the answer to (7) is no, mentally check any verbal response you are about to give by posing a series of questions to yourself, such as "Is this helpful now?" and "What do I know about this issue that is of relevance?" [Aid]
- 9 Mentally check and decide whether to intervene. [Aid]
- 10 If the answer to (9) is yes, lift your hands to your heart, take a deep breath [Ke] and say whatever you want to say [Aic] in the knowledge that your support is gentle, subtle and with a kind curiosity and that it will help the person you love to live their own unique life in the way that is precious to them.
- 11 Repeat as necessary.

Coding Strategies

Ve – Visual externally
 Vir – Visual internal remembered
 Vic – Visual internal constructed
 Ae – Auditory external
 Air – Auditory internal remembered
 Aic – Auditory internal constructed
 Aid – Auditory internal dialogue
 Ke – Kinaesthetic external
 Ki – Kinaesthetic internal

What this model has done for me

I realised when exploring this model that I held an outdated belief that I must take responsibility for everything. Carrying that belief was exhausting and counterproductive.

I now approach conversations with my children by remembering their resourceful states. I listen calmly to my daughter when she talks about defeats, challenging conversations with coaches and teammates as part of her professional rowing career. I feel deeply connected, yet light and free and curious. I listen with the intention to discover, not to respond. And I learn.

I recall a recent conversation with my son where he talked to me about a tricky professional relationship ▶

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issue. I listened and asked questions sparingly, and was amazed by his judgements and how he dealt with the situation.

Recent feedback from my son was powerful and profound. He noticed that when we discussed things that were really important to him, I would not jump in with well-meaning advice. Rather, I listened to him telling me about all the actions he had already taken or was planning to do. This meant he was more likely to talk to me about the issues that mattered to him. He also said that he was enjoying a more “adult-adult relationship”. I notice that he now shares more with me.

Teaching the model to others

I taught this model to two members of my NLP support group and the feedback was that they found it easy and straightforward to apply. They liked the physical aspects of the model, i.e. shifting your body so you create a sense of imbalance as a way of creating distance and space and speaking from the heart.

One member of my NLP support group shared that she loves “rescuing people” and that this model helped her to reflect that rescuing others might in fact do the opposite: it may achieve a worse outcome and push people away.

We explored this further and wondered whether we actually want to help ourselves because we can’t bear the emotional load. In fact, by helping others through holding space and with a belief that they have the solutions they need, we not only help them to devise better solutions, we create the positive energy for ourselves to do so.

I also taught the model to six participants, many of whom were parents, at a recent residential NLP intensive course with Sue Knight. It resonated strongly with many as a way to rebalance relationships with children. During a morning walk with one participant, she shared the story of her child and how my model has helped her to reflect on their relationship in a different way. She was stepping away from the situation and seeing her child in a different light, and this changed the way she engaged with and felt about them.

I taught the model to colleagues who related it to

situations in their own coaching or consulting practice where they need to hold space and explore, resisting the urge to fix or give advice too soon. They said it helped them to work with more joy in the knowledge that an important part of their work was just ‘being with it’ without making an initial judgement.

There are many uses for my model. It will support coaches with being in state with their clients. It will support managers to get the best from their staff. More widely, it will support public service providers to design better solutions and commission or provide better services to tackle complex social problems and achieve better outcomes in communities.

Using this model, you can step back and marvel in wonder at the ripples you have caused.

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