

Why Holding Is an Essential Practice for Physicians

David Abelson, MD

Adapted from the chapter “One Physician’s Perspective on the Value of Relationships” in the book *Advancing Relationship-Base Cultures*

According to Koloroutis and Trout¹, the therapeutic practice of “holding” patients and families means to create a safe haven around them. It means to be, if only for a time, devoted to them. If you provide someone with a sense of holding, you will add more holding to the culture as a whole. This matters not only because patients and families and your team members need holding to feel safe, secure, creative, and courageous but because you need it too.

You might even need holding more than many of the people around you. As a physician, you carry something that perhaps no one else in your organization carries. Your fears and worries are as unique within your organization as your responsibilities are. No one else carries exactly what you carry, and it cannot be otherwise. The question is, even though no one can carry it for you, will you allow the rest of the people in the organization to be more meaningfully connected with you as you carry it? When you put more holding into the world, you put more holding into *your* world.

The very nature of our work calls to the forefront the impermanence of our own lives and our desires to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe. It reveals the universal human wound of dealing with the fragility of life as we face the truth that we, like all other human beings, are doing the best we can in making sense of the complex processes of birth, aging, illness, injury, trauma, and death. Why would any of us choose to be alone on a journey as hard as this one?

The messages of our training have set physicians up to feel separate, isolated, and alone, but these messages need not dictate our professional ways of being. If we want to feel connected, it is incumbent upon us to connect. If we want to feel held, it is incumbent upon us to hold others and to allow them to hold us when holding is offered. Intentionally holding others will not just be “one more thing to do.” It will be the thing you do that makes all of the other things you do easier. You *are* connected. You’re connected to your team, to your patients and families, and to your organization. Acknowledging that inherent connection takes less energy than it takes to fight it. And while no one else can carry for you the things that you alone must carry, every burden is lighter for those of us who are committed to forging and nurturing healthy relationships.



David Abelson, MD, is a retired physician and CEO of a large midwestern health system. More about David can be found [here](#).
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¹ Koloroutis, M., & Trout, M. (2012). *See me as a person: Creating therapeutic relationships with patients and their families*. Minneapolis, MN: Creative Health Care Management.