COMPLIMENTARY

# ADVANCING RELATIONSHIP-BASED CULTURES

MARY KOLOROUTIS, RN
DAVID ABELSON, MD
EDITORS

## CHAPTER ONE

A Relationship-Based Way of Being

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# Chapter One

## A Relationship-Based Way of Being

Michael Trout and Mary Koloroutis

Who is the most relationally proficient person you know? You may not have heard the term *relationally proficient* before, but we're confident you understand the question. Who do you know who makes a practice of really tuning in to people? Who do you know who is genuinely curious about people? Who is adept at focusing on what a person says and asking questions that help that person get to the core of an issue? Who do you know who feels, to you and others, like a living, breathing safe haven?

Nearly everyone demonstrates a high level of relational proficiency at least some of the time. There are people with whom nearly all of us just find it easy to connect. The difference is that for the truly relationally proficient, there's nothing conditional about the willingness to connect; it's not dependent on how much we like the other person. Being relationally proficient becomes part of who we are. While it may be true that a few of us are born with such capacity or are nurtured in our families of origin such that relational proficiency is second nature to us, it is also true that it can be learned.

Take a look at the practices mentioned in that first paragraph: tuning in, being curious, engaging with what the person says, being a safe haven. These are relational practices, and they are learnable skills.

But are these practices necessary components of exceptional care? We have come to understand that they are necessary if care is even to be called adequate.

While these relational practices are more than mere tools, they are *in fact* tools, and when used properly, they're tools that make some very important things happen. If we use the tool of tuning in—or *attuning*—to someone, the person feels seen because she *is* seen. She feels as though she matters, and, interestingly, the more attuned attention you pay to the person, the more you will come to care about the person (Goleman, 2013). If you use the tool of genuine curiosity—if you *wonder* with and about a person—the person feels as though he is worthy of your interest, and, again, he feels as though he matters to you. If you use the tool of hooking in, with genuine interest, to what the person says or does—the tool called *following*—the person experiences that you are not only working for him but that you are working with him to find a solution or to get him some relief. If you use the tool of creating a safe haven—the tool of mentally and emotionally (and sometimes physically) *holding* the person—the person will feel safe with you (Koloroutis & Trout, 2012).

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The practices that create and nurture relationships with patients and families are attuning, wondering, following, and holding. As we teach these practices, we have noticed that there seem to be few if any people who have adopted the therapeutic practices of attuning, wondering, following, and holding in their work with patients and families who have not also embraced them in their relationships with their own families, friends, and co-workers. They are not merely "therapeutic practices;" they're the four practices that create, nurture, deepen, and improve all relationships.

## The Four Practices: Attuning, Wondering, Following, and Holding

### *Attuning*

Attuning is the most foundational of all of the practices because without it, the other practices are simply not possible. As you can see from Figure 1.1, presence and attunement create the container within which the other

practices occur. Attuning can happen in the absence of the other three practices, but the other three practices cannot happen in the absence of attuning.

Attuning is the action of being present to another; it's often explained as "meeting someone exactly where he or she is." When we are attuned we notice things about the person's way of being. Attuning also helps us notice the impact of our own presence on the other person.

Many of us find "presence" difficult—particularly when we are in environments in which distractions are the norm. What we have discovered in our work, however, is that attuning—the conscious practice of tuning in to someone or even some*thing*— actually facilitates presence. Attuning is a thing you can *do* that helps you to simply *be*.

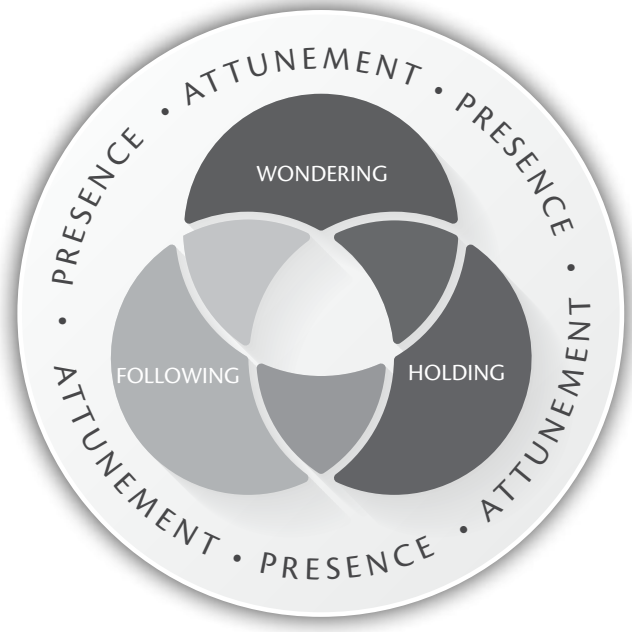



**Figure 1.1**: The Therapeutic Practices

## *Wondering*

Wondering is a practice of discovery grounded in curiosity and genuine interest in the other. The practice of wondering prevents us from making assumptions, rushing to judgment, or disconnecting from people prematurely. We become more scientific when we wonder. Wondering helps us to resist hasty conclusions, welcome and seek new data, and imagine possible explanations beyond the apparent ones. When we wonder, we miss less and notice more.

*When we wonder, we miss less and notice more.*

## *Following*

Following is the practice of quiet listening and attending to the rhythm and flow of a person's words as much as to their content. It's what a parent does in the middle of the night when arriving in the room of his crying infant. It's what you have probably done hundreds of times, when you were mysteriously peaceful and aware and quiet and able to truly observe another person's state of mind and body.

Following is usually the hardest relational practice to grasp, but you may be able to see it more clearly by looking at what people sometimes do instead of following. When a person expresses fear, for example, following is *not* saying, "You'll be fine; the doctor is on her way." Following is allowing the person to have his emotions, acknowledging them, perhaps asking for more information, squeezing a hand more tightly, or even just allowing the reality of what the person is going through to register on your face. In order to follow, you have to be able to be with people in their distress, and respect, appreciate, and learn something about who they are and what they're going through.

## *Holding*

Have you ever wondered why nearly every baby on the planet goes through a period in which she says, every day, "Hold me" (often shortened, in baby-speak, to something like "Hold!" or "Up!")? We may worry that it implies too much dependency, or we may think it's just annoying, or we

may love it. As the child grows, the daily requests usually go away, but the feeling may not. It may return at any age when one is again vulnerable, and so the need for holding (physically or metaphorically), whether we like it or not, is a key element of relationships. We have the power to help another to reexperience this primal safety net by being a person upon whom he can emotionally rely. We hold someone when we do what we said we'd do. We hold when we remember the things people tell us and perhaps act on them. We hold when we listen without defense or retort.

The purpose of deconstructing these interactions and giving definition to the individual practices that comprise them is to take the mystery out of what constitutes effective relationships. Through the study of these four practices, authentic connection can be learned, reflected upon, practiced, and mastered.

## Is This a New Idea?

Consider this illustration: You're standing in an elevator. Two others are with you. They're strangers, but within seconds of their entrance into your space, your nervous systems begin to communicate. You may even be aware that you are taking in data about the fearfulness or sorrow that shows on the face of one of them or about the unusual gait or motor tic of the other. Dozens of other cues are being exchanged too, the vast majority of them at a level below awareness. This capacity is called *neuroception*. Think of it as your brain perceiving something directly, without necessarily engaging your mind. Neuroception is astonishingly effective at helping us ferret out "safety cues" (Porges, 2004). We collect data about one another's heart rate, respiration, affect, even smell. We're looking (again, at a level below awareness) for the state of mind or intention of the other. Depending on our own experiences in life, we attach meaning to these cues: Does this sort of respiratory rate suggest the other is calm, or does it suggest we're about to be attacked?

The elevator stops at the fourth floor. You have two more floors to go. A new person enters. Discernment through neuroception begins anew. We look for, acquire, and analyze a few dozen new bits of physiological and affective data. We start to formulate conclusions. Some of them are wrong; we misperceive a cue, or we attach the wrong meaning to it. But

*Seeking to know the other, if only for self-preservation, is something we humans have been doing quite naturally for tens of thousands of years.*

we keep at it, and we don't even know we're doing it.

This is really just a story about how natural it is for nearly all of us to perceive the world around us. The study of neurobiology shows us that our capacity for the relational practice of attuning, in particular, is nothing new. It turns out that seeking to know the other, if only for self-preservation, is something we humans have been doing quite naturally for tens of thousands of years. Our neurology appears to be set up in such a way that the leap to a more conscious version of perceiving the world around us—the leap to consciously practicing attuning, wondering, following, and holding—is a very small leap indeed.

The only question on the table is this: Would we prefer to be oblivious to all this neuroceptive activity (Porges, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2001), or would we like to be aware of it—maybe toward the end of using it to improve literally all of our relationships?

## What Will the Four Relational Practices Do for You?

Someone is yelling at you. You begin to flare: "How dare he? I don't deserve to be talked to this way! It's not even my fault."

All of your reactions may be valid, no matter what the loud complaint is about; indeed, it's probably *not* your fault. But does establishing the validity of your reactions improve the situation for either of you? You notice that it doesn't.

Enter the tools: attuning, wondering, following, and holding.

You calm yourself and tune in to the person. You get curious rather than making assumptions or judging her. You begin to earnestly wonder. Your heart rate returns to something resembling normal. You get quiet. You find that you're strangely and suddenly adept at following what this person is saying, even though a minute ago, it mostly sounded like loud and challenging words, without actual content. And then, of all the bizarre and irrational things, you find yourself engaging in a momentary

act of holding; you breathe deeply and say (or think), "You know what? If I were going through what you're going through, I might feel exactly the same way."

You've gone from flailing to anchored. The relational practices of attuning, wondering, following, and holding have brought you to a quieter state of being. This, we are hearing from those who have studied these practices over time, is the great gift of the relational practices. The practices help you move mindfully from judgment to empathy.

In a care setting, the widespread application of these practices gives people a common language with which to talk about therapeutic relationships. This is the key to making the practices repeatable and refinable. We finally have language that allows people to coach and develop those who have learned, in school and at work, exactly what was taught to them about how to be good clinicians, which may not have included much if any content on how to establish and nurture therapeutic relationships.

The application of these practices isn't, however, limited to improving clinician-patient relationships in care settings. Remember that a few pages ago you were introduced to the three key relationships in Relationship-Based Care: relationship with self, relationship with team, and relationship with patient and family. The four relational practices are just as valuable when applied to one's relationships with self and team as they are in one's relationships with patients and families.

*The four relational practices are just as valuable when applied to one's relationships with self and team as they are in one's relationships with patients and families.*

Applying the practices in one's relationship with self will be addressed in depth in Chapters Two and Three, where the practice of self-attunement is particularly emphasized. Plato's admonition to "know thyself" is widely accepted as a fine idea, but it's not exactly a how-to. Attuning, wondering, following, and holding, in one's relationship with self, are the how-to. Self-knowing (or self-attunement) enables you to understand your own responses to the people and circumstances around you. It is next to impossible to maintain a sense of composure in challenging circumstances without self-attunement.

The benefits of applying the four relational practices in teams are discussed in depth in Chapter Nine, but they boil down to this: The reason to apply the four relational practices in teams is that they make every interaction smoother and more effective. Because attuning, wondering, following, and holding improve all relationships, they have the power to improve team functioning in ways that are hard to calculate. If even one person in a relationship is attuning, wondering, following, and holding, the relationship will be improved. If two or more are adept at the practices (or are even attempting them), the impact can be transformative.

As people begin to practice attuning, wondering, following, and holding in a health care setting, the language of the practices enters the cultural narrative of the organization, department, or work area. People start talking about how they didn't get triggered by someone's anger because they "*wondered* rather than moving right into judgment" and realized there was a backstory in play, even if they might never come to know the details of that story. People start talking about how they *followed* just a little bit longer than usual: "Normally, I'd have started reviewing the rules and consequences for absenteeism with him right away, but I could see that something was up, so I just stayed present and tried to create a safe haven for discussion. That's when he told me his father with Alzheimer's moved in with his family a week ago . . . and that his wife moved out two days later." There's nothing inherently wrong with leaping right into "reviewing rules and consequences" with people, but it's pretty easy to see how the use of attuning, wondering, following, and holding cannot help but improve every encounter, every time.

Adopting these practices will change the way you think. They'll make you more receptive. They'll help you feel more anchored. They may even make you more courageous. One of our colleagues, a woman who had been practicing attuning, wondering, following, and holding for more than five years at the time of this book's publication, reported:

> The before-and-after is pretty striking for me. I find that "difficult conversations" are no longer difficult for me. My fear had always been that in broaching a tough topic, I might accidentally hurt someone's feelings. That was a big barrier for me, but I don't feel that way anymore. I don't even have to know what I'm going to say. I can just invite someone into a conversation where our only intention is to

> wonder together and see what we discover—I often verbalize this as a mutual intention before we begin. It's completely nonthreatening for both of us, and even if the other person isn't aware of the practices, the tension is released. Then I can attune, wonder, follow, and hold my way through anything that comes up.

This same colleague noted also that she now no longer finds herself feeling like she has to persuade people of anything. Before she was skilled at the four practices, when she had a point she felt adamant about, she was afraid of being strident (or being perceived as such); now she finds that it's impossible to be strident when she's attuning, wondering, following, and holding. Not surprisingly, she readily confirmed that all of her relationships have improved significantly since she has become more relationally adept. How could it be otherwise?

It's interesting to us that the use of attuning, wondering, following, and holding in all relationships also seems to foster personal authenticity in people. It's true that you could attempt to use the practices as "techniques," but it is our observation that they don't stay techniques for long. Just as it was, perhaps, only a technique for physicians to "pull up a stool and sit at the bedside at eye level" for a certain number of minutes (Bush, 2011), it was a technique that fostered more authentic connection. It was not that patients and families liked this practice because their doctors sat for a certain number of minutes; they liked it because their doctors connected. Attuning, wondering, following, and holding work the same way. Your motive in adopting these relational practices doesn't matter one bit. If you do them, you will be more authentic in your relationships, and your relationships will improve.

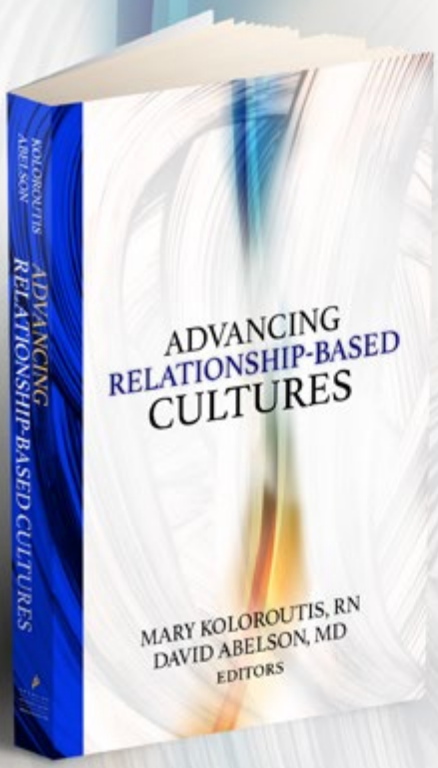
## Summary of Key Thoughts

- The practices that create and nurture relationships with patients and families are attuning, wondering, following, and holding. They are not only "therapeutic practices"; they're the four practices that create, nurture, deepen, and improve *all* relationships.

- The relational practices of attuning, wondering, following, and holding can be learned.
- Attuning is foundational to all relatedness. Without it, the other practices are not possible. Attuning is the action of being present to another; it's often explained as "meeting someone exactly where he or she is."
- Wondering is a practice of discovery grounded in curiosity and genuine interest in the other.
- Following is the practice of attending and sometimes responding to the rhythm and flow of a person's words as much as to their content.
- The relational practice of holding happens when we do what we said we'd do, when we remember the things people tell us, and when we listen without defense or retort.
- The study of neurobiology shows us that our capacity for the relational practice of attuning is nothing new. Seeking to know the other—if only for self-preservation—is something we humans have been doing quite naturally for tens of thousands of years.

## Reflection

- What are some ways in which you would expect your relationships to change if you were to attune, wonder, follow, and hold more often?
- What might change as the language of the four relational practices enters the cultural narrative of your organization, department, or work area?

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