



HUMAN CONNECTIONS · ACCIDENTAL COUNSELLOR

The Power of Presence

*The most powerful thing you can offer someone in crisis
isn't advice — it's presence.*

BY ROCKY BIASI · CREATOR OF THE ACCIDENTAL COUNSELLOR TRAINING

It's Not Advice. It's Presence.

You're in the middle of a busy day when a colleague pulls you aside. Their eyes are glassy. Their voice is tight. They start talking and something in you immediately begins scanning — *what do I say? How do I fix this? What's the right response?*

That urge to help by doing something is completely understandable. It's what most of us were taught. But the moment you go into scanning, planning, and problem-solving mode, you've already left the conversation. You're no longer with them — you're in your own head.

And the most powerful thing you can offer someone in that moment requires something entirely different. It's not a solution. It's not a referral. It's not even the perfect words.

It's your full, undivided presence.

What Real Listening Feels Like

Before we go any further, I want to ask you something.

Think of a time when someone really listened to you. Nothing changed. No advice was given. No problem was solved. But after the conversation — you felt different.

How did you feel? And what was that person like with you?

I've asked this question at the beginning of our Accidental Counsellor workshops for years — to more than 20,000 people across Australia, New Zealand, and Southeast Asia. Every time, the answers are almost identical.

"I felt heard."

"I felt seen and understood."

"I felt less alone."

"I felt lighter."

And when I ask what the listener was like, the answers are just as consistent: **calm. Non-judgemental. Patient. Attentive. Fully there.**

The listener hadn't done anything complicated. They hadn't offered solutions or carefully chosen their words. They were simply present — and that changed everything.

But one answer has stayed with me more than any other.

"I Think It Was Her Presence."

An SES volunteer and paramedic put his hand up. He told us about something that had happened thirty-three years earlier. His son had been stillborn. He spoke quietly about a nurse who stayed with him and his wife throughout that day.

"I've never forgotten her," he said.

I thanked him for trusting us with something so personal. Then I asked something I hadn't planned to ask.

"Can I ask you something? Thirty-three years later, you still remember that nurse with such gratitude. Why did you appreciate her staying with you, rather than wishing she'd just left you alone?"

He paused for a long time. The room was completely silent.

Finally he said, "It's hard to explain..." Another pause. Then: **"I think it was her presence."**

Not her advice. Not her words. Not something she did. Her presence.

That moment has stayed with me ever since. Because over the years I've heard the same answer thousands of times — from teachers, nurses, parents, police officers, volunteers, managers, and students. Different people. Different professions. Different countries.

Yet when people remember the conversations that mattered most, they almost never remember what was said. They remember how someone was with them.

The Three Solutions I Had Ready

I learned this the hard way. During my counselling training in 1995, I defaulted to fix, rescue, and problem-solve — it's what I'd grown up believing was how you help. Someone would come to me in distress and I'd have three solutions ready before they'd finished their second sentence.

I thought I was being helpful. What I was actually doing was telling them, without meaning to, that their feelings were a problem to be solved — not an experience worth hearing.

What I've learned across almost 30 years and thousands of conversations is that the people who walked away feeling genuinely helped weren't the ones I'd given the best advice to. They were the ones I'd actually listened to.

Somehow, when people feel deeply heard, they begin to hear themselves. They find their own clarity. Their own next step. Not because I'd pointed the way, but because they'd finally felt safe enough to look.

It took me years to understand what my dear friend and clinical supervisor Dr David Lake was really pointing at. I thought he was talking about skill and knowledge. I've come to believe he was talking about something else entirely.

What's Happening Beneath the Surface

Here's what's happening beneath the surface of that nurse's presence, and every conversation like it.

Emotions don't stay neatly inside one person. They transmit. Research on emotional contagion by psychologists Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson shows that we unconsciously absorb and mirror the emotional states of people around us — through micro-expressions, tone of voice, posture, and pace of breath. You don't choose this. It just happens.

Which means the state you walk in with matters enormously. If you arrive carrying your own unprocessed stress, distraction, or emotional weight, you don't just fail to help — you amplify what they're feeling. Their dysregulation has somewhere to land. And it lands in you.

But when you arrive regulated — grounded, calm, breathing evenly — mirror neurons fire and the speaker's nervous system begins to synchronise with yours. Their emotional activation drops. Not because you said the right thing, but because your state communicated safety.

This is co-regulation.

And when someone finally feels that safety, the body does something remarkable. Dr Jill Bolte Taylor has popularised the idea that the initial neurochemical surge of an emotion lasts around 90 seconds unless it is continually re-triggered. After that, if the emotion isn't re-triggered, the chemistry begins to clear. The person can breathe again. They can think again.

But it only clears if the person feels safe enough to let it move through. The moment they sense you're genuinely with them — not waiting for your turn, not flinching, not quietly solving — their nervous system receives permission to process. Interrupt that with advice, or a premature question, or visible discomfort with the silence? The wave resets. And the person carries it home.

Your state is never neutral. Before you've spoken a single word, you're already changing the conversation.

You're the Medicine

There's a version of accidental counselling that looks like a series of techniques — the right questions, the right responses, the right referral pathways. Those things matter. But they all sit on a foundation that makes them work.

That foundation is presence. Full, undivided attention on the person in front of you.

When someone feels genuinely companioned — not assessed, not advised, not fixed — something shifts. The nervous system settles. The initial wave of neurochemical activation finally has the space to complete its course. The chemistry clears. The person can breathe again.

You didn't solve anything. You didn't say the perfect thing. You stayed — and you were actually there.

I spent years thinking being helpful meant having the right answer. Then my dear friend and clinical supervisor Dr David Lake said something I didn't fully understand at the time:

"You're the medicine."

He wasn't talking about what I knew. He was talking about how I showed up. He was talking about presence.

That nurse didn't fix anything — she couldn't. But she was there, completely, quietly, without agenda. And thirty-three years later, a father still carries her with him.

That is the power of presence. And it's something anyone can learn.

The Gap Between Performing and Being There

Most of us have felt the difference — not as the listener, but as the person speaking.

You're partway through explaining something difficult and you catch it: the slight glaze in their eyes, the almost-imperceptible shift in posture, the nod that's just slightly too quick. They're gone. Physically present, mentally elsewhere.

Something closes in you. You speed up, wrap up, edit yourself down to the parts that seem worth their time. The conversation ends and you feel, if anything, more alone than before.

Performing attentiveness without actually being present is more damaging than people realise.

The speaker doesn't just miss out on connection. They register, at some level, that they weren't worth the full attention. That compounds the original pain.

This is the gap between going through the motions and genuinely helping. The difference isn't technique. It's where your attention actually is.

You are either bringing calm... or adding to the chaos. That's why genuine presence protects the listener as much as it serves the speaker. They're not two different outcomes. They're the same thing.

The H.A.R.T. Model™

Presence isn't a personality trait you either have or don't — it's a trainable capacity. Over nearly 30 years, this is what I've distilled it into. HART contains 'heart', because presence is, at its core, a quality of being, not a technique.



H

Here — Prepare your state before the conversation

You can't be present for someone else until you've left your own world behind. Pause at the 3rd Space — the threshold between your world and theirs. Acknowledge what you're carrying, then take three slow, conscious breaths. Not ceremony — physiological preparation.



A

Attune — Regulate yourself so they can regulate too

Co-regulation in practice — listening with them, not to them. Notice your own activation before it leaks into the room. When you arrive genuinely grounded, your nervous system becomes the steadiest thing there — and often, theirs begins to settle too.



R

Receive — Companion them, don't rescue them

Full attentional contact. No fixing, no advice, no premature questions. When someone goes quiet, resist the urge to fill the silence — it's often where the real processing happens. All the other counselling skills sit on top of this foundation.



T

Tend — Complete the cycle for yourself

Genuine presence protects the listener as much as the speaker — but it takes intention to close the loop. After a hard conversation, check in with yourself before moving on.

The AAA Sequence — Self-Compassion in Three Movements

If you notice the energy of an emotion still present after a hard conversation — not moving — work through this sequence. Emotion is meant to move us, and move through us.



If the emotion hasn't shifted within three weeks — that's your signal. Seek debrief, supervision, or professional support. **Carrying it alone isn't presence. It's depletion.**

TAKE THIS FURTHER

You Didn't Solve Anything. You Stayed.

When someone feels genuinely companioned — not assessed, not advised, not fixed — something shifts. The nervous system settles. The person can breathe again.

You didn't solve anything. You didn't say the perfect thing. You stayed — and you were actually there. That is the power of presence. And it's something anyone can learn.

[Explore the Accidental Counsellor Training →](#)

Rocky Biasi is the founder of Human Connections and creator of the Accidental Counsellor Training program, which has equipped more than 20,000 people across Australia, New Zealand, and Southeast Asia with the skills to respond when someone brings a difficult moment to them.



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