Emotional Presence · About 4 minutes

When Company Is What Is Wanted

Accompanying a disappointment without deciding how it should change

The rejection from the exhibition is still open on Alba's screen when Jon starts suggesting other places to send her work.

Alba and Jon are fictional, but their crossed purposes are familiar. She worked toward a deadline and imagined seeing the pieces together in a local space. He wants to help her find another opportunity. She tells him that tonight she wants to be disappointed without preparing another submission.

He could believe her.

That may be harder than it sounds. If you care about somebody, remaining beside an unchanged difficulty can feel ineffective. A practical idea gives you something to contribute. Listening may leave you wondering what your presence is doing.

Ask less of the outcome

Fosha's writing on experiential psychotherapy emphasizes responsive company while difficult feeling is approached.[1] Friendship is not that treatment, but there is a related everyday possibility: staying interested without requiring the person to recover in order to make your presence worthwhile.

Jon might ask what Alba had hoped this particular exhibition would offer. A local audience? The satisfaction of completing the work? A chance to share it with somebody important? Hearing her answer gives the loss a more particular shape.

He need not agree that the venue made a bad decision. Understanding why it mattered to her is already a different kind of participation from arguing that another opportunity will be better.

Nor should he turn listening into a requirement that she remain sad. Alba can decide she has talked enough, ask for distraction or return to practical planning. Presence includes noticing when the wanted help changes. A conversation does not become deeper merely because it lasts longer or produces tears.

Jon may have ten minutes before his bus comes. He can offer those honestly. A smaller period of company may be welcome, or Alba may prefer to call another friend. Neither has to disguise the size of what is wanted or available.

Research on received support highlights responsiveness to the recipient.[2] It does not establish that listening is always superior to action. Tomorrow Alba may want help carrying the work home. Tonight she has named a different need.

You might compare two possible openings: "Let's find another venue so you feel better" and "You had wanted this one. I can listen for a bit, if you'd like." The second leaves the purpose of the conversation closer to what Alba has said. If the words sound formal, use your own.

Practical duties still matter. A booking may need cancelling, or someone may be waiting for an update. Company can accompany those tasks. It does not require enduring contempt, threats or unwanted contact; either person can end an unsafe interaction.

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Alba's rejection gives Jon something concrete to listen to.

Picture Jon pulling up a chair. The exhibition has already answered. He has time to hear what it meant to Alba to send her work there.

Companion reading · Staying With What You Cannot Fix

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Emotional Presence (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Fosha, D. (2021). Introduction: AEDP after 20 years. In D. Fosha (Ed.), Undoing aloneness and the transformation of suffering into flourishing: AEDP 2.0 (pp. 3–23). American Psychological Association. Source.

[2] Maisel, N. C., & Gable, S. L. (2009). The paradox of received social support: The importance of responsiveness. Psychological Science, 20(8), 928–932. Source.

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