

# Code Culture

Using The Pitt to Discuss Psychological Safety in  
Health System Pharmacy

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**2026 ICHP Annual Meeting**

I have no conflicts of interest with ineligible companies.



## Learning Objectives

- Define psychological safety and its role in communication and patient safety within pharmacy practice.
- Identify common barriers that prevent team members from speaking up in healthcare environments.
- Describe practical strategies and communication techniques that promote psychological safety across pharmacy teams.



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## Welcome to “The Pitt”

- Medical drama on HBO Max
  - Front-line healthcare workers at Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Center
  - Each episode is one hour in a 12-hour shift
- Key players for this presentation:
  - Dr. Robby, attending physician: brilliant, empathetic, complicated
  - Dr. Langdon, senior resident: charismatic, competent, Robby’s protégé
  - Dr. Mohan, senior resident: intelligent, caring, thorough
  - Dr. Santos, medical resident: ambitious, competitive, sharp-tongued



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## Setting the Stage: Ice Cold

Treating a patient undergoing therapeutic hypothermia

- **Robby:** How long does she need to stay in the ice, Dr. Santos?
- **Langdon:** My PB in the ice is 13 minutes.
- **Robby:** Dr. Santos.
- **Santos:** Until her temp is normal.
- **Langdon:** Wrong. You pull her out at 102. Otherwise, we could overshoot and cause hypothermia.

Interventions continue...



"The Pitt" S1Ep10  
Image from subscription service



## Setting the Stage: Ice Cold

- **Langdon:** Why is she on the ice, Dr. Santos?
- **Santos:** To bring her temp down.
- **Langdon:** Wow, state the obvious, yet still don't answer the question.
- **Mohan:** The quicker we bring it down, the less of a chance for permanent damage to the brain, liver, or kidneys.
- **Langdon:** Exactly. Was she sweating?
- **Nurse:** Profusely.
- **Langdon:** What if she wasn't, Dr. Santos? What if she was dry as a bone?
- **Santos:** Then we'd have to think anticholinergic overdose, not sympathetic.
- **Robby:** Very good.



"The Pitt" S1Ep10

## Case Example: Seizing

Drs. Mohan and Santos are treating a patient with critical hyponatremia

- **Santos:** She's seizing.
- **Langdon:** You think? How long?
- **Santos:** About three minutes.
- **Langdon:**
  - **Why did you not come get me?**  
Hello? I was... I was across the hall. I was 30 feet away. What has she had already?

*Interventions continue*



"The Pitt" S1Ep10  
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# POLLING QUESTION 1

Why didn't Santos get Langdon?

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## Psychological Safety

*A shared belief that the team is safe  
for interpersonal risk-taking*

Edmonson A, 1999.



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# PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

WE ARE HUMANS FIRST,  
EMPLOYEES SECOND



Team members can,  
without fear of  
embarrassment,  
punishment, or  
humiliation:

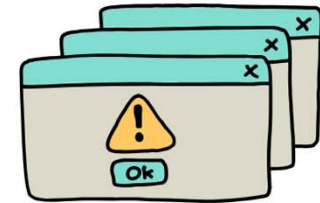
1

ASK QUESTIONS



2

ADMIT MISTAKES



3

RAISE  
CONCERNS



4

SEEK HELP



5

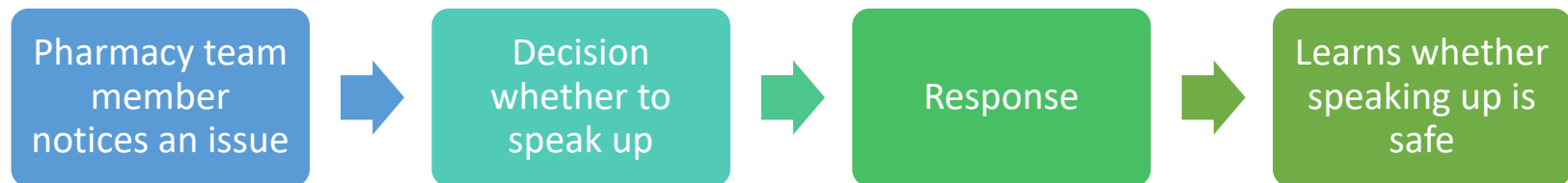
CHALLENGE  
ASSUMPTIONS



Adapted from: Helbig K, Norman M 2025



# Silence is a Patient Safety Issue



## Meanwhile, in the pharmacy...

Technician notices something unusual but thinks the pharmacist might already know about it

Resident thinks the preceptor's recommendation might be outdated

Student notices a discrepancy but doesn't want to look stupid



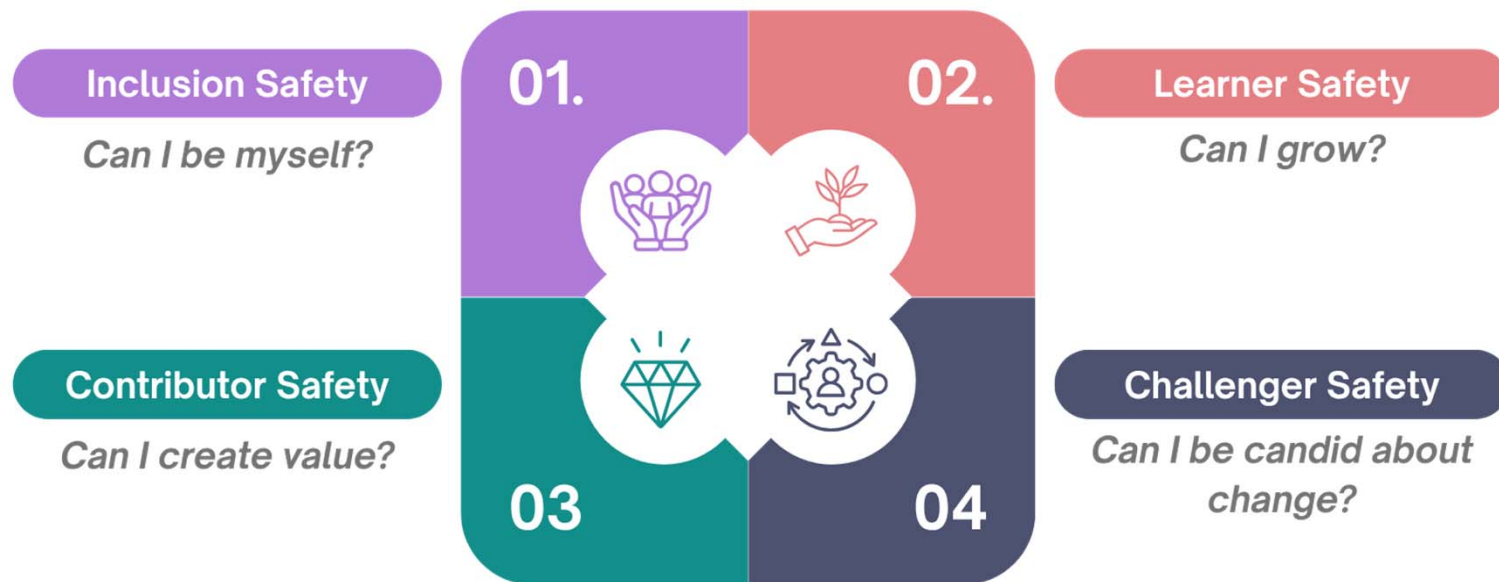
# What did Santos learn from Langdon?



Image from subscription service



# Stages of Psychological Safety



Clark TR, 2020



# Building Inclusion Safety

## Inclusion Safety

*Can I be myself?*

01.



- Learn names and pronunciations
- Ask twice as much as you tell
- Listen, pause, then respond
- Express gratitude and appreciation

Clark TR, 2020



# Building Learner Safety

02.



Learner Safety

*Can I grow?*

- Share past mistakes
- Frame problems before trying to solve them
- Embrace quality feedback
- Dedicate time and resources to learning

Clark TR, 2020



# Stages of Psychological Safety

## Contributor Safety

*Can I create value?*

03



- Celebrate wins and recognize achievements
- Set rules of engagement
- Create stretch goals or assignments
- Ask people what they think

Clark TR, 2020



# Stages of Psychological Safety



04

## Challenger Safety

*Can I be candid about change?*

- Model the art of disagreement
- As a leader, weigh in last
- When rejecting ideas or feedback, explain why
- Engage at the start



## Seizing Case: Confrontation

- **Langdon:** Good call, Dr. Mohan. Another minute, and we'll de-ice her. I am going to take that minute to try to instill in Dr. Santos a very clear understanding of what her role is here and how she is expected to function.
- **Mohan:** Dr. Langdon...
- **Langdon:** Dr. Santos... and I say doctor in such a fashion to draw attention to the ridiculous fact that you have enjoyed that title for, what, 90 days? So yeah, I'm confused.
- Is it... is it hubris or ignorance that makes you think that you know more than other residents that have two to three years more experience and have helped thousands more patients in the emergency department than you have? Not to mention the over 500 hours of advanced training with lectures and simulation labs with senior faculty instruction.
- It doesn't matter! Stupid or arrogant, you need to realize that you are a beginner, which means your job is to shut up, listen, and learn because so far today, the only thing you have been successful at is proving repeatedly that you know nothing.

"The Pitt" S1Ep10



## Seizing Case: Intervention

- **Robby:** Dr. Langdon. Is the patient stable?
- **Mohan:** Temp's 102. Just about to take her out of the ice.
- **Robby:** Proceed. Dr. Langdon, a word, please.

### ***Robby and Langdon move to the hallway***

- **Langdon:** Look, I know that sounded rough, but you only caught the tail.
- **Robby:** Stop talking.
- **Langdon:** I can give you a list a mile...
- **Robby:** Stop talking.
- **Langdon:** She was giving unsupervised...



"The Pitt" S1Ep10

## Seizing Case: Teaching moment?

- **Robby:** Knock it off. Shut the \*\*\*\* up! Where does it say that shaming, belittling, and insulting are effective teaching tools? Let me just tell you, harassment has zero educational value. You're feeling upset? She's getting under your skin? Check yourself. Take a break. I've been watching you ride her. This kind of behavior will not be tolerated. I don't want to see it.
- **Langdon:** I'm sorry. It won't happen again.
- **Robby:** Where's your other one? Where's Mel?
- **Langdon:** She's taking a breather.
- **Robby:** Yeah. Well, maybe go find her, and see if you can get her back in the game. You are senior leadership here. Step up and act like it.

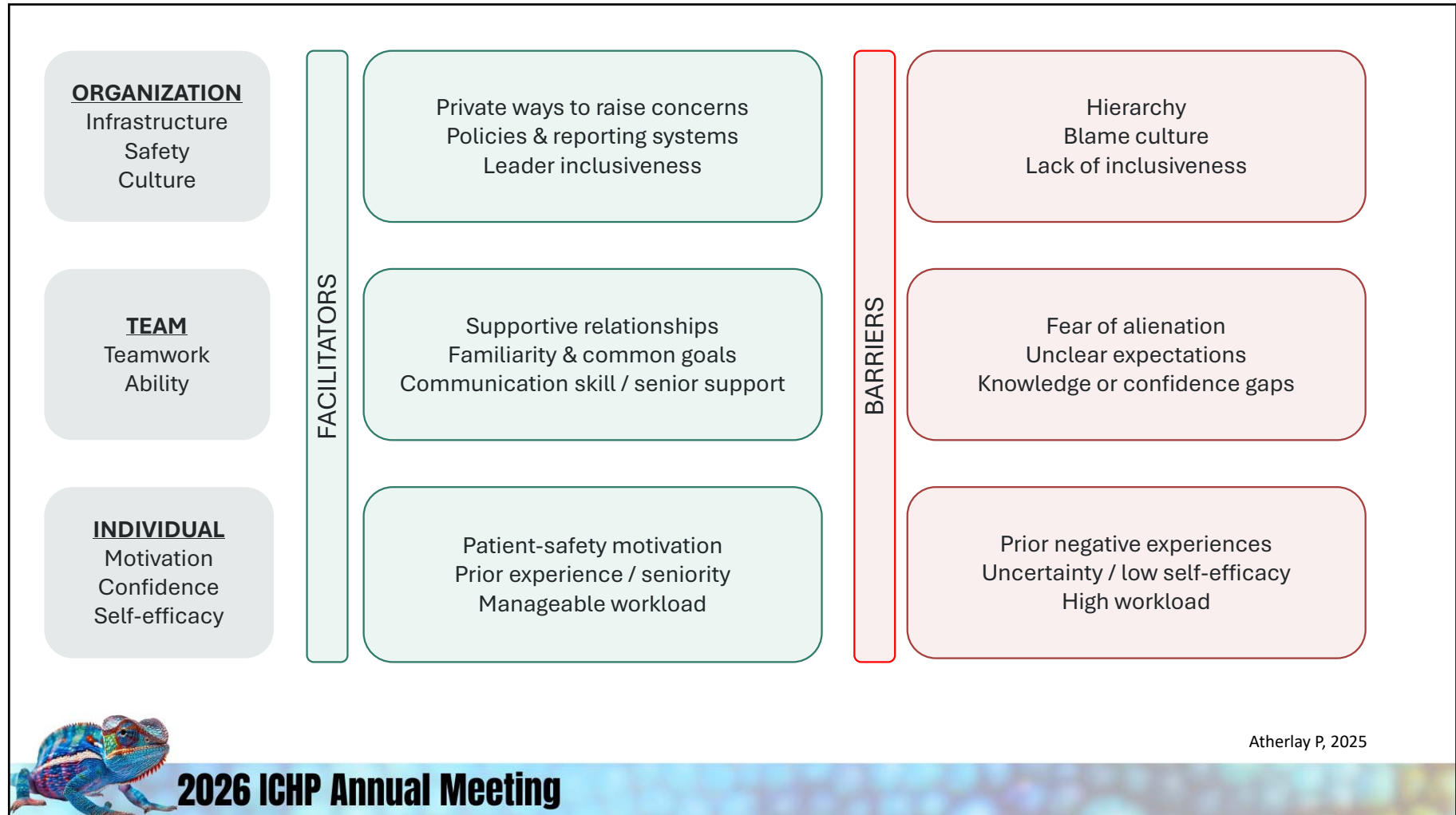


"The Pitt" S1Ep10

## Meanwhile, the pharmacy team...

- E.D. pharmacist challenges an antibiotic choice
- Decentralized pharmacist questions the accuracy of a med rec
- Verifying pharmacist messages a prescriber *again* about a questionable order





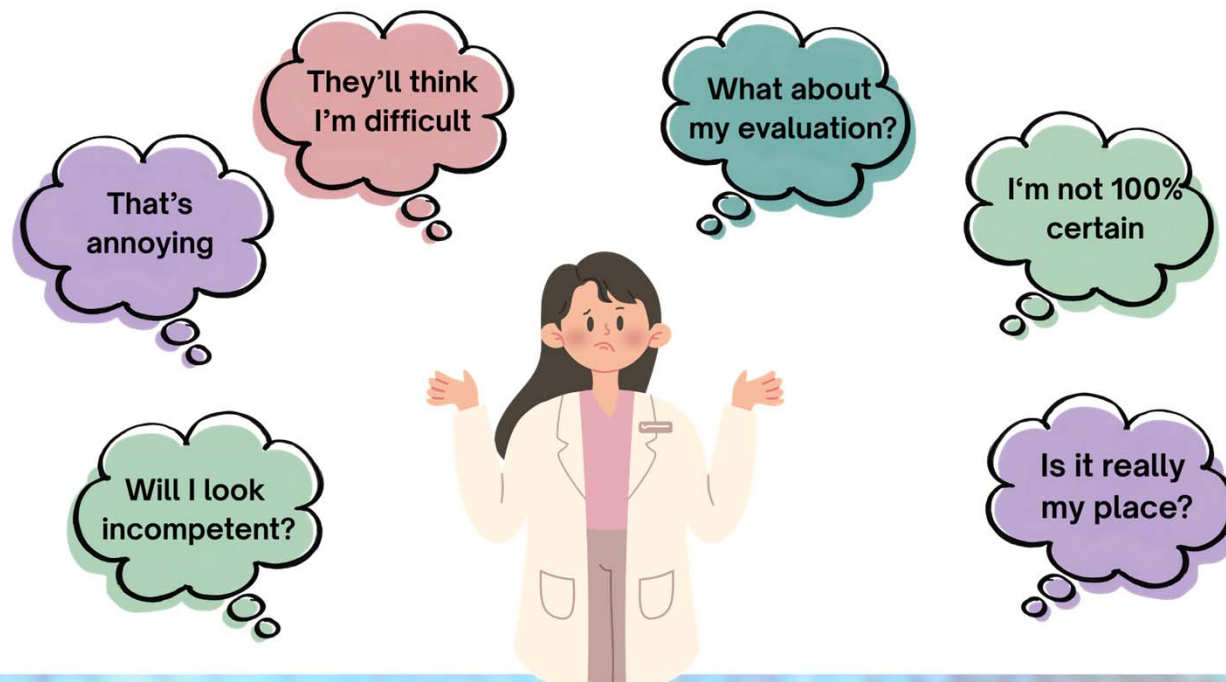
# The Many Hierarchies of Healthcare

- Experienced Employee & New Hire
- Pharmacist & Technician
- Manager & Staff
- Preceptor & Learner
- Physician & Pharmacist



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Is this concern important enough to justify the social risk of saying it?



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## Benefits of Strong of Psychological Safety

|              |                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Individuals  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Personal well-being</li><li>• Work-related stress reduction</li><li>• Sense of belonging</li></ul>                                   |
| Team         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Willingness to discuss errors</li><li>• Sharing knowledge and information</li><li>• Participating in constructive feedback</li></ul> |
| Organization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increased patient safety and outcomes</li><li>• Job satisfaction and performance</li><li>• Positive workplace culture</li></ul>      |

Atherlay P, 2025



## Case Example: An Attempt Was Made

- **Robby:** Dr. Santos, a moment, please? So, how's your first day going?
- **Santos:** So far, so good.
- **Robby:** Getting along with everyone?
- **Santos:** Yeah, pretty much.
- **Robby:** Except Langdon? So in this ER, we all need to work together as a single unified entity. And if two people on my team can't work together, it kind of throws the rhythm of the place off.
- **Santos:** Understood.
- **Robby:** My duty, regardless of personal relationships, is to make sure everybody on my team is doing OK. So, are you doing OK?
- **Santos:** Uh, it's not a big deal. I can handle it.
- **Robby:** Handle what?
- **Santos:** Nothing. It... it's fine. I... I don't wanna get anyone in trouble.
- **Robby:** Hmm. OK, if there is anything... anything that could affect my ER, I need to know about it, and you have a responsibility to tell me.



"The Pitt" S1Ep10

## POLLING QUESTION 2

What facilitators of psychological safety factored in this interaction?

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## POLLING QUESTION 3

What barriers to psychological safety factored in this interaction?

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# Building a Toolkit: Assertive Responses

| Situation                 | Language                                         |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Clarify</b>            | "Can you walk me through what you are thinking?" |
| <b>Express concern</b>    | "I'm concerned about..."                         |
| <b>Escalate</b>           | "I'm uncomfortable because..."                   |
| <b>Safety threshold</b>   | "This is a patient safety issue"                 |
| <b>Challenge</b>          | "I see this differently because..."              |
| <b>Invite dissent</b>     | "What am I missing?"                             |
| <b>Leader response</b>    | "Tell me more"                                   |
| <b>Two-Challenge Rule</b> |                                                  |

Team STEPPS 2023.



## The First Ten Seconds Matter

- Speaking-up tools are two-way interactions
- Acknowledging the concern
- What does your body language say before you ever say anything?

"I think this dose might be too high."



"We've already discussed it."



"Tell me what you're seeing."

Team STEPPS 2023.



The question isn't, "Do people on my team know they can speak up?"

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The question is, "*What happens when they do?*"



*“The strength of our healthcare system is proportional to the mental health of our practitioners and the degree to which we support them.”*

---

Noah Wyle

Actor, writer, producer, & director



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## Resources for Health Workers

- The Emotional PPE Project: Connects health workers with licensed mental health professionals for free therapy services, no insurance
- 24/7 Crisis Support:
  - 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (phone, text, online chat)
  - Crisis Text Line: Text CONNECT to 741741



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