

## **Empathy, Compassion and Optimal Distance**

By Bret Lyon, PhD, SEP, BCC

At the age of four, Barry\* had been forced to do something very much against his nature by his father, something about which he still felt great shame, and which was affecting his current relationships. Having done years of somatic work, he was ready and eager to feel into that painful memory in order to overcome it. I kept him in the present for quite a while, drawing him out and complimenting him about his competence and strength in the present, his successful career, his love of nature. Then I suggested that he could feel into that past memory. But, I cautioned, “Go back to it as you are now—a competent, resourceful adult, keeping all of your resources with you. You can be with that child that was so hurt and shamed. You can have compassion for that child.”

There is an important distinction to be made between being *in* an emotion and being *with* an emotion. With my clients, I always stress being *with* an emotion, rather than *in* it. Our tendency with emotions and “child parts” is to push them away or give in to them. Many of my more sophisticated clients, who have done somatic work before, tend to identify with their feelings—and actually lose themselves in them. Other clients don’t want to go there at all. I suggest going back to the scenes of trauma and shame as a full adult, bringing all of your resources with you. The client can have compassion for what the child went through without having to regress and endure the full onslaught of the painful feelings. The client can go back, keeping her capacity to see the big picture, including the fact that she is no longer in that situation. She can actually tell her child that it will get better. I have found it extremely important to guide the client in keeping a proper distance from feelings and memories. This helps to build compassion and an ability to see the big picture. I have found it an essential tool in working with shame or trauma, which keep the past very much alive in the present.

I thought I would elaborate by sharing a diagram that Sheila Rubin and I have developed and work with in our Healing Shame workshops. We call it “Establishing Optimal Distance.” Of course, optimal distance isn’t static. There is a range. We can move somewhat closer or somewhat further away, so long as we retain the ability “to feel and to deal,” as Diana Fosha describes it. Peter Levine calls this “the window of tolerance.”

The diagram is based on the idea that the most powerful tool the therapist has is her ability to guide the client’s attention—to suggest where to look, what to pay attention to. We also suggest that there are four realms of human experience, four ways in which we receive and process information. We started with two basic realms—cognitive and

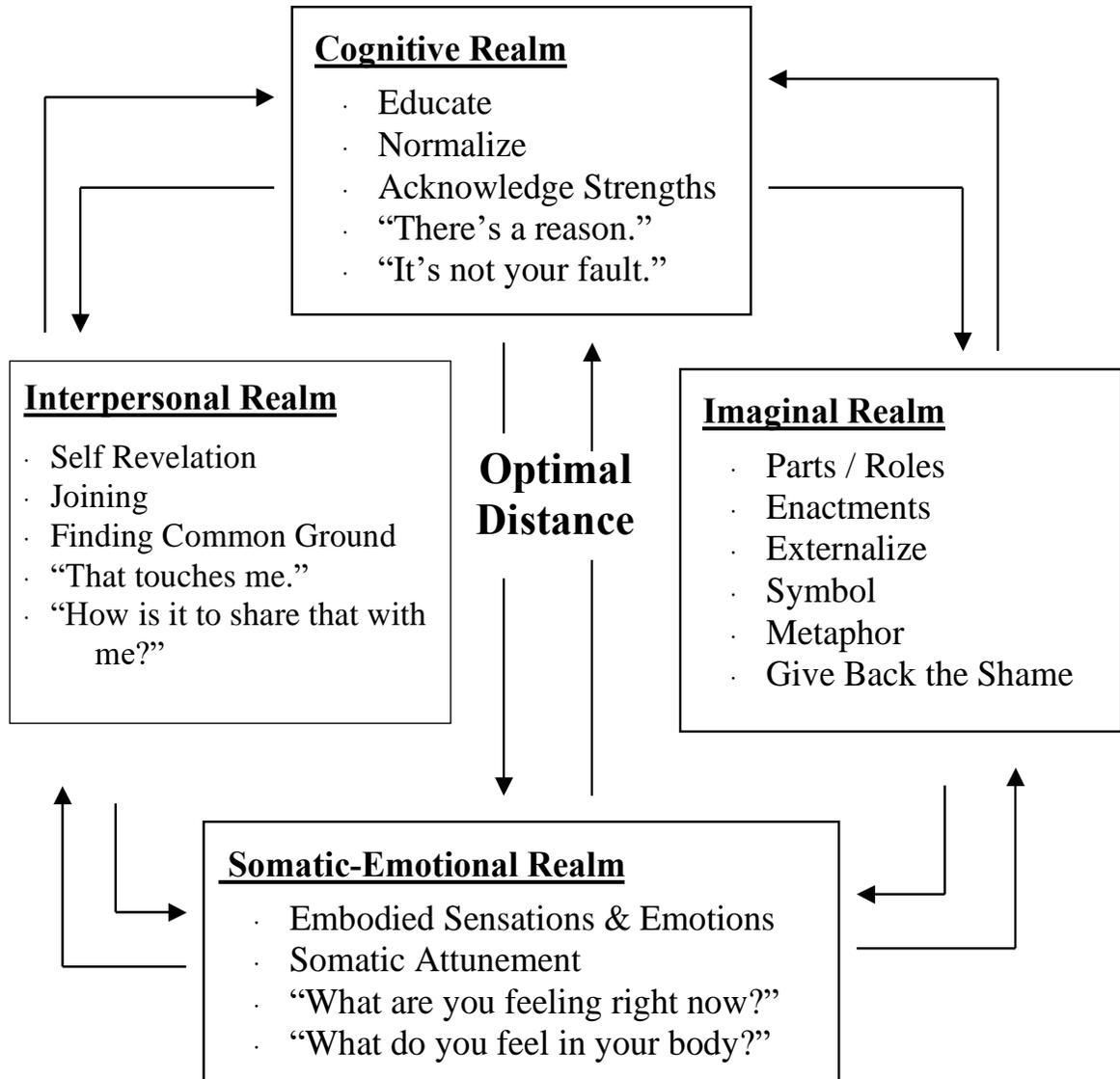
somatic-emotional. In the thinking realm, we are furthest away from our emotions. In the somatic-emotional realm we are the closest. By guiding the client's attention between these two realms—thinking and feeling—we can try to keep him involved and yet not overwhelmed. Once we figured this out, two other realms occurred to us: the imaginal realm—the realm of story, myth and metaphor; and the interpersonal realm—the realm of connection between people, especially important in attachment theory. We positioned these realms between cognitive and somatic-emotional, as they can involve both thinking and feeling. The ability to move the client to and through each of these four realms can create a flowing richness of experience that can keep the client comfortable, interested and involved in process, able to both feel and deal—without getting overwhelmed or spacing out.

In working with couples, pursuers tend to be overly close with their feelings—often getting lost in them. Withdrawers can be overly distant, not actually allowing themselves to feel and express their feelings. We work with pursuers to contain, with withdrawers to feel and express. In both cases, we work for optimal distance. We also work for optimal distance between them.

See the diagram on the next page.

# Guiding the Client's Attention

Attachment – Attunement – Resourcing



\*Names changed to protect client privacy.

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