

REACHING IN RURAL BRITISH CO

Modifying a somatic therapy group for mothers and delivering it to fathers

BY CATHERINE KIMBER, RCC

In 2019, several colleagues and I at the Williams Lake Child Development Centre (CDC), which is located on the traditional territory of the T'xelcenc people, designed and began running a somatic therapy group called Body Based Healing (BBH) for mothers. Since its inception, we have run 12 groups, each presenting opportunities to refine the content, delivery, and group process.

Detailed here are my reflections on delivering this group to fathers for the first time, specifically through the lens of reaching out, an embodied gesture that comprises one of the key BBH building blocks. Reaching out consistently emerged as an unexpected catalyst for emotional interconnectedness and transformation among participants. Pausing to reflect and build on the process of reaching out has informed how we deliver the BBH group in the future.

ORIGIN STORY: EXPERIMENTING WITH REACHING OUT

I was first employed by the CDC in 2018 to work with families, and one of the ways our centre supported parents was through the 10-week BBH closed group. In it, we gave parents the opportunity to study experientially how their procedural tendencies, attachment wounding, and trauma show up in the present moment. The goal is to develop participants'

ability to pause, develop awareness of their present moment experience, and increase their options for how to respond.

BBH is predominately grounded in sensorimotor psychotherapy but also draws on attachment theory, emotionally focused therapy, Ruella Frank's work on developmental movements,¹ interpersonal neurobiology, and non-violent communication. Each group is taught through the active participation of two facilitators.

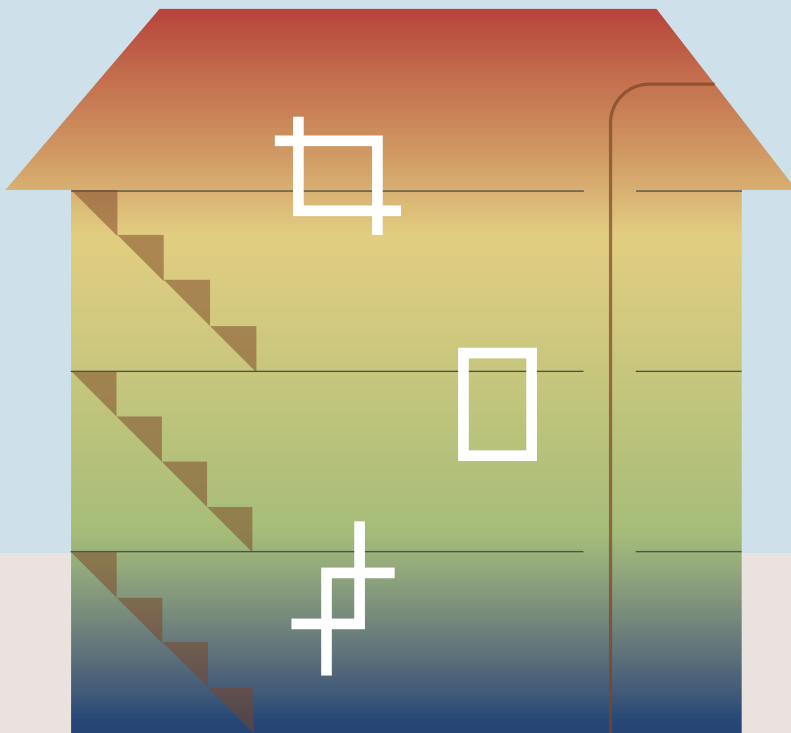
Confidentiality is notoriously difficult to maintain in small, rural communities. In response, participants were asked to refrain from sharing personal stories. While this "no storying" guideline helped participants feel more at ease in the group, it also — and even more crucially, it turned out — promoted experiential, present-focused somatic learning.

Participants share their experience of the somatic experiments (such as embodying dignity,² building a boundary, or making a gesture of reaching out to the group) by reporting on what they notice in their bodies, thoughts, feelings, and how connected they feel to themselves and others. This way of sharing helps participants to stay in their present experience and not get caught up in existing narratives of the past and future. Participants can be with another's nervous system and become aware of how they are responding

OUT LUMBIA



HOUSE OF CAPACITY



→ **Figure 1:** House of Capacity is a fusion of Jane Clapp's Window of Capacity and Dan Siegal's Window of Tolerance, indicating the zone within which one can respond to the demands of life. Each BBH session begins with participants doing a non-verbal check by placing a marker on the House of Capacity.

without being drawn into the specific details of the traumatic experiences. This approach often allows participants to be more receptive to people to whom their biases would have otherwise closed them off from.

Each of the 10 sessions focuses on a different BBH building block: regulation; grounding and soothing/taming; survival resources (instinctive resources that have helped endure stressful situations or cope in one's family of origin); thriving resources (developing a pause where options can be considered and new ways of responding can come forth); internal boundaries, relational boundaries, reaching out; attachment patterns; and implementing the building blocks

through art to externalize an emotion.³

Each session has the same rhythm to enhance the felt sense of safety, beginning with participants doing a non-verbal check by placing a marker on the House of Capacity (HOC; a fusion of Jane Clapp's Window of Capacity⁴ and Dan Siegal's Window of Tolerance model⁵ (see Figure 1). This is followed by a body scan to foster participants' awareness of their present experience before, in turn, reporting on their "weekly curiosity" (i.e., self-assigned homework individually determined at the end of the previous session).

The building block of the day is introduced by facilitators via discussion and teaching, with most of the session then dedicated to experiential learning

through somatic experiments. To give a sense of this, in exploring boundaries, each group member drew upon their felt sense of either survival or thriving boundaries to construct a concrete physical representation which could then be used to conduct experiments and explore procedural tendencies. From their self-constructed boundaries, participants were invited to reach out, either as an isolated gesture or to another. People were also invited to try out the boundaries that were constructed by others so they could track how their felt experience subsequently changed.

Boundary work can also involve somatically exploring ideas of worthiness and connection. With each building block, participants were encouraged to stay away from asking "why" and instead focus on being present with what comes up in the moment through curiosity and non-judgment.

REACHING OUT TO FATHERS

As we revised and gained a deeper understanding of the how to present somatic work in a group setting, I gained confidence that while the group was not for everyone, those who integrated the material into their daily life experienced subtle and often significant shifts in their relationships.

Interest in a similar group for fathers grew, in part because of the changes the fathers had witnessed in their female partners. In spite of this, I was uncertain if the content would translate well to a group of men. I wondered if they would commit to the program as the women had, despite the interest they expressed, or if they would attend and decide that what I was offering was too "touchy-feely" and irrelevant to their lives.



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I also wondered how my procedural tendencies would impact how I reached out to and received the men. The group integrates how I approach and understand the world: experiential, open-ended, collaborative, explorative, and grounded in curiosity and compassion. The group can also be unpredictable, as working more in a “bottom-up” approach can unearth the unexpected.

REACHING OUT TOGETHER

Because of my uncertainty in a father’s group, I was more cautious in how I approached emotions and vulnerability. For this initial group, I recruited a male colleague as a co-facilitator who had trained as a sociologist before becoming a counsellor. Our conversations assured me that I could address overwhelming emotions in this group in the same way I had in previous groups: by taking a

few drops of the present experience and breathing in compassion for the self, followed by breathing compassion out for others.⁶ We have traditionally used this technique when participants cry, but it made sense to apply this same tool to reach out to anger with compassion and support. Yet, vehement anger did not arise in the group. Instead, the men began to explore the shame that often arises with the experience of strong unregulated feelings. They moved into spaces of vulnerability.

Through the supportive atmosphere and implementation of the building block tools, participants began to titrate and “tend and befriend” strong emotions, the historical imprint of developmental wounding and trauma. By week two, the men were somatically exploring the shameful, inadequate, and

grieving parts of themselves. Moreover, they allowed others to witness and support their struggle. They quickly began to ask each other questions about their current experience along with thoughtful insights into their experiences of the present moment.

My co-facilitator’s sociological background led to curiosity about how group interconnectedness impacted the clients’ organization of experience. Indeed, the major group refinement we introduced was to be more explicit about connectedness in somatic experimentations and sharing.

Historically, group participants can share what they noticed in their “body, thoughts, and feelings” after

trying the somatic experiments. In this iteration of the group, and from now on, we invite participants to also note how connected they feel to themselves and others. There were a few pivotal moments in the group where embodying the connectedness allowed people to fully access and take in the somatic felt sense of the building block. Previously during the “reaching out” building block, participants would physically reach out to the group from a grounded place while taking in the message of “in this moment, I am enough.” In the men’s group, we made the support more explicit by having the group respond with “I am here with you” to the man who was reaching out. These shifts allowed people to deepen their experience of reaching out from a place of regulation and being received.

For some participants, this was an unfamiliar and healing space to hold. It prompted me to reflect on my biases that women predominantly provide relational connection and comfort. I thought the group would run more like “male islands,” but it was in the men’s group with a male co-facilitator where reaching out was deeply fleshed out. This gave the men permission to reach out in new ways and have their reaching out be witnessed. In turn, some of the men reported that they became more accepting of the feelings that were driving their anger — something that resulted in less anger in general.

MOVING FORWARD WITH REACHING OUT

Exit interviews were conducted with each participant. If the father had a female partner who had also completed the group, we invited them to interview as a dyad so we could explore how they integrated the material into their family life. One couple discussed the difference in how men and women



show up in the group and commented that: “If men committed to the group, they were there to show up and do the work, where, in general, women worry about how the others perceive them in the group, and this can lead to paralysis.”

The men’s group challenged my own reaching out pattern. I thought anger might negatively affect the group and my ability to manage my nervous system. The following is a broad generalization, of course: the “get ‘er done” attitude of Cariboo men allowed all of us, including me, to enter into the work with less restraint. I did not feel I had to caretake group members’ nervous systems as much as I typically do in the mother’s group where there is more of a tendency for the material to activate shut-down responses. As the group progressed, I reached out with spontaneity, humour, and bravery, and

I have taken this approach forward to subsequent groups.

The group gave the fathers and, with them, their families a new shared language to explore their regulation and attachment miscuing and ways to become aware of how their dysregulated survival patterns impact their families. The relational part of being seen, seeing others, feeling connected, and not feeling alone with shame were noted as healing parts of the group. Not having people share their histories lets them see themselves and be seen differently, as though the clutter and weight of their stories have been removed, allowing the essence of their humanity to come into focus. People want to reach out and be reached out to, but many have little experience of this. The attachment building block works explicitly with this dichotomy: the part of us that we want



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deeply seen is often the part of us we want to keep hidden.

A common theme was that the men realized they had largely ignored their emotional world and that this had relational consequences. One father stated, “It was easier being ignorant, but there has been a cost to my family and myself.” Men reported wanting to reach out more, while the women in the relationship welcomed the emotional reaching out but also, at times, struggled to adjust and process their feelings about these new patterns. As one woman observed, “It was like the dam broke open and I was being swept downstream.” Many couples found this challenging at first but were already seeing benefits, including the courage to keep reaching out, showing new parts of themselves, and being open to transformation.

Couples also shared that they now

have a common language to understand how habitually reaching from a place of survival has created patterns of behaviour that obfuscate their needs. Couples said they could now be more aware of these patterns in interactions, allowing them to pause and reach out differently so that their needs could be better seen and tended to. Couples described their homes as calmer and less angry; they do not need to “manage their kids’ behaviour” as much, as they are choosing to work on their regulation and needs, which, in turn, creates more of a felt sense of safety in the whole family.

One of the greatest gifts we can give another is to reach out from a place of connection and regulation. During an exit interview, one of the men shared that he has introduced the HOC tool to promote more regulated communication in his workplace. He added that one of the most impactful moments for him was a somatic experiment where he reached out and let himself take in drops of being enough and not being alone — a feeling he was unfamiliar with. I would suggest that this experience has supported him in risking more to reach out. Embracing the emotional self, with the group’s support, allowed for transformation.

REACHING OUT ANEW

For the last year, we have been doing staff training to make the principles of BBH alive in our organization. We have recently started an “all gender” BBH group and plan to run a BBH group for youth. I don’t know how

men and women will respond to interconnectedness and reaching out, but the confidence and courage I gained in the men’s group have allowed us to put connection more at the forefront of the group process.

Being part of this BBH group for fathers helped me refine my ideal of reaching out from a place of love and being open to unexpected co-creation. I want to reach out from the “wholest” part of me available in the moment and be receptive to what is present in the other. The men’s group both allowed for new avenues of exploration and challenged my assumptions about what men would be like.

In the final group, the men talked about what the group meant to them, and I spoke of how exploring and being together in a vulnerable caring way let me more easily access love in my day-to-day life. Then we ate Saskatoon crisp together, and because it was the last group, we relaxed the “no storying” rule. The men talked about fishing and knives and the slow-pitch league. Gentle reaching out was alive between us all. ■

Catherine Kimber is an RCC living in Williams Lake, B.C.

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