

AST MODEL[®]

Shame Resolution & Resilience

empower worth and belonging



AST Model[®]'s Work with British Clients

The Interplay between Cognitive and Somatic Realities

by Caryn Scotto d' Luzia, MA, SEP, AST Model Developer



Background

As the developer of the gentle yet highly effective somatic shame resolution model, AST Model of Holistic Shame Resolution[®], I have worked with people all over the world, and I have noted differences in the way natural and cultural environments shape people. This has encouraged

me over the years to adjust the way I deliver resolution processes that shift core stuckness, chronic shame, all forms of inhibition, self-alienation and inner conflict.

For example, there is an overall difference in working with people on the east coast vs the west coast of the US; one group does not feel met unless the threat of humiliation is clearly acknowledged, while the other requires that self-acceptance and well-being be held out front and center. To work effectively with Asian cultures requires an understanding of public/ private face and respect as an extension of one's family and community. In working with British clients, so too have I noticed a reoccurring leaning. I would like to share that with you here, not to pigeon hole any one person or culture, rather to offer a perspective that may prove helpful in working with others.

Cultural Context

Keep a Stiff Upper Lip

Let me begin by acknowledging my love for British culture and its countryside. I first visited England when I was twenty years old. Having been a fan of Shakespeare, the Romantic Poets, the Brontes, Medieval Music, pomp and pageantry, I basked in all the nooks and crannies that were made available to me. When it came time to wander about the Lake District and meditate upon the hills and mortarless ancient stone walls of Wordsworth country, I found it incredibly fulfilling.

I encountered the *Keep a stiff upper lip* attitude that in many ways has served Brits and those around them so well. Having grown up in New York, I felt a certain kind of kinship with it. One must survive after all. And there is a certain sense of pride to endure at all costs while things and people crumble around you, not to mention the downright usefulness of it.

As someone trained from birth to excel in crisis, the alternative of giving in to crisis, chaos, *the crumble*, is simply unimaginable. Why would anyone want to for that matter? I prefer the crumble of a delicious savory baked good in my mouth.

But to survive without the ability to be tender, to appropriately gush and coo has no meaning for me as my stiff upper lip is tempered by my being Italian, a culture where people's interaction with the environment is one of sunshine, vine wild fertility and warm waters; in other words, where life is well suited for the senses. Most Italians whether physicists or pianists move easily into a sensorial based response over just about anything: the smell of fresh baked bread, the laughter of a child, the warm pelting of an evening's rain.

Moving back and forth from the left to the right hemispheres, from a sensorial or body based experience to a cognitive one comes easily to Latin or warmer-climate based cultures. If we think back to difference I acknowledged about working with people from the east and west coasts of the US, the more laid back attitude prevails in the west where the temperature is temperate and there is less struggle to harmonize with the natural surroundings.

Back in Europe, across the channel where the weather is harsh more than half the year, gray skies prevail for months on end, and pelting evening rain makes you shiver not dance; here, a drawbridge is often required to cross from the well protected castle of the mind to the moat of the body and beyond.

Here cognitive apprehension of the world is a source of pride, protection, resource, value and abundance. The mere suggestion of separating a Brit from his or her rational faculties can feel akin to stripping one of one's honor, one's dignity, one's sense of worth. As a result the ability to *truly* move from cognition to embodied experience can be tricky.

Common Pitfalls of Somatic Application

By no fault of their own, clients often *think* they are working somatically when they are not. They confuse the *idea* of feeling good, feeling safe, feeling empowered with the actual experience or the *felt sense* of it in their bodies.

They will honestly share with you that they feel empowerment in their body, but when you ask them to describe the experience it is often off body, through past memory, or *what their mind thinks it should feel like*, that is, if they don't launch into an outright analysis of what the experience should or shouldn't be, or how they've read neuroscience for years and get all this already.

If you can track a client's neurobiology through their breath, eyes, autonomic nervous system signals you can tell the difference between what the mind is expressing about the experience versus the embodied experience itself.

Of course, to point this out has the potential to be shaming or alienating. Instead, it is preferable to guide clients to some level of greater embodiment and take them only as far with it as they are willing, ready, and able to go. That is not to say as clients progress into greater embodiment they may want to go more fully into it because the experience itself can be grounding and gratifying.

Please note:

Guiding a client toward greater embodiedness should by no means feel like a trick, a self-imposed agenda, or a violation. How sessions unfold should always come from a place of uttermost respect and sovereignty of an individual to choose the experience he or she is having. Hopefully your client has come to see you because they are interested in working more somatically, or you have explained this is how you work and they are naturally curious and wanting to experience the benefits somatic work has to offer. These kind of understanding must take place explicitly and prior to the session work.

Protection Against Emotions

The castle of the mind does protect and maintain detachment from the moat of the body and its very swampy emotions. Expertise in somatics is not required for us humans to know our emotions are held in our bodies.

We know if we give into feeling that stiff upper lip it may begin to quiver. If someone has been raised to detest, dismiss, ignore, or ridicule emotions and their expressions in the past, then a person is not inclined to welcome the mere idea of the lip quiver. Needless to say, if one's connection to one's culture, one's wider community, depends on these sets of beliefs then expressing emotions will on some level set one apart and cause abandonment from one's herd, even if it is a conflicted, uncomfortable sense of belonging. Keep in mind, we are social mammals; we need to belong so as to feel adequate.

British Culture is not known for its deep emotional expression. It is known for black comedy, witticism, highly crafted theatre and restraint of emotions. The British Romantic Poets get away with their emotional abandon because it is contained inside the constraints of the poem. The rules of verse and meter and the poetic devices that so strategically convey the abandon hold the restraint, the form from which the expression can spool out. These works are amazing examples of right and left brain hemispheres at play together.

Shakespeare uses similar troupes and theatrical devices and his most interesting characters live in juxtaposition between inward restraint and outward expression.

In most cultures there is an understanding that human development aims at the human's ability to control one's emotional outbursts, making somatic work or its promise of connecting with emotions, sensations and experience almost childish to some.

So the *idea* of experience is often preferred over *having or embodying* the experience. This idea can act as guard against falling into the messy, murky and dangerous emotional swamp.

Please Note:

Knowing how to help your client manage the deluge of repressed emotions when they surface is a very important part of somatic work, and letting your clients know you appreciate the importance of not letting them become overwhelmed should their deep emotions arise is often crucial for people to feel safe enough to allow themselves to notice the slightest tingling in that upper lip.

The Leaning

So, if the leaning is to work off body, to *what their mind thinks their experience should feel like*, what's a somatic practitioner to do??

I often have great results with helping clients to parse out their cognitive consciousness from their somatic awareness. This is commonly experienced as a great relief and one they could not get to themselves. Once the interplay of these realities are simplified, very effective results ensue.

The Importance of Tempering Cognitive Dominance

It is crucial for truly successful neurobiological work, (untangling of the wiring of various branches of the nervous system, associative memory pathways, innate impulses, emotions, sensations and beliefs that are rooted there) to be able to access through the body without the distraction of the cognitive mind.

Very much worth the effort: as it renders people greater choice, satisfaction, integrity and wholeness. Not to mention it actually allows cognitive intelligence to be more available, flexible and fresh since one is not acting, re-acting or re-enacting strictly from old neural patterns, rigid beliefs, stuck childhood experiences and memories.

How To Temper Cognitive Dominance

I use reality checks. I explain the objective truth: somatic realities of the ANS or autonomic nervous system do *not* require buy in, approval, permission, faith, trust, or cooperation of the cognitive mind. Autonomic means automatic.

This notion, that the mind isn't the CEO of one's experience might be a bruise to the cognitive ego for a moment, but one worth inflicting gently and one from which the ego easily recovers.

Can cognitive tempering produce a conflict between facilitator and client?

I find the right amount of "physio-education" at the right time can go a long way. After all, it takes into account the cognitive mind and partners with it; hence, tempering its dominance not banishing it. There is nothing dishonoring about that. When you explain to people that the mind is 3x faster than our sensorial self in registering, shifting, or processing when not under threat, and that despite the fact that the mind can hold more than one experience at once, the ANS and its somatic container is not one for multitasking. Neurobiology shifts best in incremental chunks, especially when integrating new experiences and neural pathways. If we could do all this at once the homo sapien would not be 20 years in the making.

Humans take longer to develop and fully mature than any other species on the planet. So this sequential, step by step firing, opening, laying down of neural pathways, circuits, impulses in and from the brain are on nature's clock. For this reason overloading impulses, circuits, neural networks rather taking a stepped approach at the body's own pace, tempo and awareness will undermine your overall efforts. Sometimes mind and body speeds can line up, but often they don't. I explain this to clients in a way they can understand. This is what I mean by physio-education. This does help to put client and facilitator on the same page.

Then I invite the client to notice where it would like its cognitive mind to watch the somatic portion of the session from so it doesn't feel banished. It is not an active participant but it does get to be a captive audience. If the cognitive mind can't find safety watching a few minutes of the session unfold than we know we need to work first on overall safety before we going any further.

The last fifteen minutes of AST Model sessions are always devoted to integration. This usually involves some level of cognitive integration. I ask client's to bring paper and pen to their sessions for this final leg of our journey together. In this way, the mind knows at the onset of the work that it will have its time to comprehend, evaluate, editorialize on what has happened.

Alternative to Cognitive Tempering

If physio-education appeals of temporarily forgoing logic while in somatic practice doesn't sway your client, then go with your client's natural inclination to work off body: make use of image, metaphor, and embodied imagination. These allow the shift process from the implicit to the explicit to take place and can also be tracked in the body through these third party players. British language, literature, theatre, music, puns, and overall culture is loaded with the use of

images, metaphor and imagination. After all, Harry Potter is an English story. The Brits have no dearth of vision. In fact, the stiff upper lip preserves and holds on tenaciously and stupendously to the sense of beauty, order and integrity in design, of things fitting together, in things making sense both cognitively and sensorial. There does not need to be the sacrifice of one over the other, rather a fluid interplay of cognitive and sensorial at work and taking lead over the other depending on context.

This peaceful interplay is not so dissimilar to those stone walls of the Lake District standing for thousands of years despite the destruction of time, ravages of wind and torrential rains. We would have them no other way. We love and admire how they endure, how each stone leans upon the other utilizing only the exact amount of rock hard strength it needs and not one ounce more. As humans, to experience an authentic sense of effortlessness in the face of challenge and endurance is one definition of mastery. The ability to exist larger than one's own small piece, as cogs fitting together for sake of the whole is an unspoken gift of life. Our work with clients is sometimes helping people regain their mastery, their authentic inner and outer connections, and to remind them how to lean and apply only the amount of effort that is truly needed. This innate grace is at the heart of all humans and helping to restore it is much needed by our clients and in this larger world.

AST MODEL: APPLICATION OF CONCEPTS

Short Case Studies

Case Study: Alice

Alice is a thirty something woman who endured a great deal of early trauma. Even the slight mention of noticing her body would launch her into an unrelated story about something or another. Knowing her history, of course she would want to avoid what was held inside. So we worked *off body* through images we could track in her body. One day we worked on her sense of choice.

I enacted all the somatic exercises I wanted her body to experience while she watched. Her neural networks shifted to greater safety and relaxation when she saw me hold a pillow to my chest for comfort. That was something in her childhood she was not allowed to consider let alone do. Her inhibition patterns shifted the safer she felt and the more we worked. After a series of 9 sessions she began to do some of the exercises herself and her ability to work 'on body' became easier. If I had pushed her to work directly with her body when she wasn't ready, I am sure she would have felt shamed for not being able to do so and much of the inhibition she shifted would still be hanging around, if not further re-enforced.

Take-away: Meet clients where they are and guide gradually in a stepped approach

Case Study: Marion

He is a sixty something gentleman who had worked in government all his life. He was excellent at sorting things out around him. When I even suggested something bodily he'd smile like a little polite boy and dismiss it. I connected with him on spy novels and strategies and from there I explained the strategy of somatic work. How we get to find our way out of the castle and down through the draw bridge without falling into the moat. I assured him even if he fell into the moat, I had the proper tools and equipment to fish him out immediately. I had to appeal to a sense of safety that was missing in his associative memory around his early traumas.

He enjoyed the metaphor and it allowed him to drop into his body. When he did within seconds he was reclined in the chair with his head tilted back and his mouth open. He went straight into a tonsillectomy surgery he had when he was a small child and his body was frozen there. We went on to renegotiate his trauma in the session. There was good reason he was protecting the castle. He needed a truly trustworthy and effective guide that he felt he could trust somatically to lead me out and across the bridge to the land of bodily safety and agency once again.

Take Away: There are good reasons our clients are leading with and from their mind. If you guide them away from that structure be ready to work on whatever comes up. It is not likely to be pretty.

Case Study: Eugenia

A woman in her forties who found daily social interaction an embarrassment and source of shame. She had a particular neighbour who would scapegoat her for anything that went wrong and Eugenia couldn't bear it. Her stomach would go into knots and she would hide out socially and feel bad about herself inside. We worked on parsing out her mind from her bodily senses and she stated a sense of great relief. She could feel in her body the neighbour's demands and comments were insane. This did not make her want to be close to her neighbour, but it allowed her to feel the rightness of her impulse to avoid her without feeling shame and guilt. There was simultaneously a working out of shaming incidents with her mother. The work left her feeling "put back together inside." She felt "a cog" had been removed from her programming and she was able to process this situation a new.

Take Away: When our thoughts become obsessive and predictable sometimes allowing space for the body to come forward can be a great relief and allows for new and fresh thinking and overall shifts in experience of oneself.

Questions? Comments?

Email directly: caryn@re-embodylife.com

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