

# Craniosacral therapy: Treatment feels like a week in the Bahamas

By Betsy Rothstein

Craniosacral therapy is not as frightening as it sounds.

It doesn't involve cracking or pounding on the skull, or any other untoward action to the head. In fact, compared to most massage therapies, body masks and scrubs, this treatment is the least invasive and doesn't involve lotion or oils — so forget the paper panties; this one does not require the client to remove a single item of clothing except for shoes. Loose, comfortable clothing is preferred.

But don't think that the clothes-on experience won't reap a reward — the \$80-\$120 treatment, in my experience, was far more powerful and interesting than any ordinary massage. A word to the wise: Seek an experienced and licensed practitioner. For the purposes of this story, I bravely ventured into the unknown territory of the rare treatment, meaning that I knew little about the practitioners before the visits. Thankfully, both of my experiences were good ones.

First off, what's craniosacral therapy?

The therapist places hands lightly on the body to detect the rhythm and restrictions of the cerebrospinal fluid as it flows through the craniosacral system, from the skull down the spine. The movement can be felt most readily at the skull, sacrum and coccyx, as these bones attach to the membranes that enclose the cerebrospinal fluid.

The therapist's hands don't actually move. She applies a slight pressure of her hands (as one practitioner put it, the "weight of a nickel") to different parts of the body, and they rest there until they have tapped in to the rhythm of the spinal fluid and are ready to move on.

It's hard to feel what the practitioner feels. In my first experience with Lisa Shimberg, a licensed physical therapist in Arlington, Va., she placed one hand at the base of my skull and the other near my sternum and asked if I could feel the swishing in between. I couldn't, but so be it; the aftereffects of the treatment were amazing. Although initially I felt groggy, and even got lost on my drive back to Washington, as the day wore on I felt refreshed, as if my energy had been restored. The main thing I noticed: a deep sense of peace.

Craniosacral therapy dates back to the early 1900s when William Sutherland, an osteopathic physician, discovered that the bones of the head can move. In 1970, another osteopathic physician, John Upledger, witnessed a rhythmic movement of the craniosacral system during a spinal surgery. After more than a decade of research, in 1985, he created the Upledger Institute to teach practitioners about

craniosacral therapy.

The treatment promises to improve sensory, motor and intellectual function. In English, it offers deep relaxation and relief from headaches or jaw pain, and, according to Lahr, it "helps people become more empowered in their lives."

One aspect of the treatment involves tissue memory. Both therapists explained that tissues of the body contain memories — positive, negative and sometimes traumatic. "When you're doing any kind of body work, you're changing the tissue," Shimberg said, explaining that craniosacral therapy can conjure up memories. "Sometimes people start to smell things or think about people they hadn't thought about."

Perhaps it was the power of suggestion, but once Shimberg had me on the table and I was off in cranio la la land, childhood memories of running through my back yard from a friend's house flashed in my head. Thankfully this was pleasant — and I didn't smell anything — but because the visions were so vivid, I found it strange.

Shimberg told me I wasn't taking enough air into my lungs, so she spent a good deal of time with her hands at my rib area. She asked whether I'd ever broken

any bones in my right shoulder. I hadn't, although I had told her that I tend to carry stress in my neck and shoulders.

The next day I was back for a second treatment of craniosacral therapy, this time in Lahr's office, with warm, pale-yellow walls and lit candles. Lahr, a licensed massage therapist since 1992, is certified in advanced craniosacral therapy. Her office is in the Teal Center in Arlington, Va.

From my previous experience, I could hardly wait for my second treatment, although I wondered if too many treatments so close together would push me over some sort of edge. (Thankfully, it didn't.)

Once on the table, embarrassingly enough, my stomach began rumbling. I was trying to will it to be quiet when Lahr told me it had nothing to do with my light lunch. She said that this was a good sign, that things were starting to move. At first, I felt as if I had in my first treatment — as if nothing was really happening. But in the last half-hour of the treatment I was transported to another state, at which point she asked me to describe how I was feeling.

I had such a hard time with this, feeling as if I were in slow motion of sorts — not

asleep, but not awake either. In my altered state, all I could muster was: "I am feeling deeply relaxed."

Lahr explained that the central nervous system consists of membranes around the brain and spinal cord called dura. Within the dura, she said, is spinal fluid that has its own pulse. This is what she feels for when she is determining what needs to be done to still the body and allow it to release.

"Your body has its own innate wisdom, it knows what you need," she said.

Indeed. As I awoke from my treatment, I noticed zero tension in my neck and shoulders. I left the Teal Center with a new peace of mind, feeling as though I had spent a week in the Bahamas.

*Craniosacral therapy is not offered in most area salons and spas. Shimberg can be reached at (703) 525-14307. Lahr can be reached at the Teal Center at (703) 522-7637. Shimberg charges \$120 per session. Lahr charges \$120 for the first hour-and-a-half session and \$80 for each hourly session thereafter. Craniosacral therapy is also offered at the Fountains Day Spa in Alexandria, Va. Phone: (703) 549-1990.*

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