



By Liz Brinson, LMT, CST-D

The practice of CranioSacral Therapy is a practice of balance. Practitioners are encouraged to work from a right brain place of creative receptivity — and yet there is plenty of interesting left brain work to be done when we're hands-off.

The work itself is structural, but it is also strongly informed by intention. Even the gentle touch of the CranioSacral Therapist is not *too light a touch*, one that would keep us from feeling anything, but also not *so heavy* as to dampen the plethora of information available to a practitioner's hands. It's somewhere in between. Here's a short and concise way to describe CranioSacral Therapy:

CranioSacral Therapy (CST) is a light-touch, whole body, manual therapy that addresses tension around the brain and spinal cord to enhance self-regulation.

This definition includes a few key points about the work. CST uses light touch, only enough to create change. It is a whole-body therapy. It is hands-on, meaning practitioners work and feel for changes in the tissues. And its intention is to facilitate the body's innate capacity for self-regulation, which is itself nature's balancing act.

The Integrating Touch of CranioSacral Therapy

Inspired by History

Interest in the structures of the CranioSacral System dates back 2,000 years. In Upledger Institute International's coursework, we discuss three people who shared the following admirable qualities:

- A keen interest in learning, especially about anatomy;
- The willingness to explore the body, unfettered by expectation, through palpation; and
- The courage and tenacity to contradict commonly accepted beliefs in their field.

Dr. Still, Dr. Sutherland, and Dr. Upledger each persevered to create a body of work and to inspire and teach others what they understood. What does it take to learn to listen with your hands and learn as you go? That is the ever-unfolding exploration of all who practice CST.

Unpacking the Principles

The following are three principles that inform our work:

1. The body functions as a dynamic unit.

Just as people connect with and affect our environment, our body systems connect with and affect each other.

Vertigo nearly ended 1992 bronze medalist Mary Ellen Clark's diving career. Her doctors looked at her head and neck because that's where the structures of the vestibular system are. However, it was only when Dr. Upledger identified and released a restriction in her knee that her vertigo went away.

We apply this principle by maintaining awareness of the whole person and being, even as we work with specific structures or systems.

2. Structure and function are interrelated.

The way our bodies are formed can affect how we function just as much as the way we use our bodies can affect its form.

Here's a common cycle of structure and function reinforcing each other in a not so helpful way: Stress can lead to poor postural habits, which can lead to adverse strain patterns in the neck, which can then lead to pain and even stress, which can then reinforce poor posture.

Gently release adverse strain patterns, and you may well enhance function. We do this in CST by working through the tissue matrix of the body, sometimes deep into the central nervous system.

3. The body is naturally self-regulating and tends towards homeostasis.

"Homeostasis" is the tendency toward a relatively stable equilibrium between interdependent elements, especially as maintained by physiological processes.

Definition of homeostasis. (2022, February 11). Oxford University Press. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/homeostasis>

The body is constantly compensating and balancing, and it likes to do the most amount of work with the least amount of energy. Examples of self-regulation are endless! The body is constantly balancing, healing cuts, fending off colds, managing fluids, and maintaining temperature. Through the practice of CST techniques, we learn to follow with intention and trust that the body will lead us to facilitate the change it most needs in the moment.

The Practice of CranioSacral Therapy

Intentioned Touch

The broad intention of CST work is to facilitate the body's natural tendency toward balance and ease. To do that, we use light touch.

There are many ways to understand the value of light touch. For one thing, it helps us avoid provoking a defensive response in the tissue. Light touch also allows us to feel more, to get more information through our hands. In addition, the tissues of the body are suspended within a matrix of tiny fascial threads. Feeling and correcting restrictions in this matrix takes light touch. And finally, you might consider the light touch of CST to be more of an invitation than a direction; this allows our clients to know through touch that they are deciding whether and how change will occur.

After taking my first CST class, I was practicing on a friend. I had my hands in position for a fascial technique called the pelvic diaphragm. Because I felt a lot happening at the posterior (back) body, I asked my friend what she was noticing.

"Your back hand feels like it's sunk in, but your front hand has not," she said.

In that moment, I recalled my CST teacher saying, 'if in doubt, lighten up'.

I gently lightened the pressure on my anterior (front) hand, and my friend said, "Now you've sunk in."

Treating the Whole Person

Bodies are complex. People are complex. We may not know the full story of the body when we plan a treatment. In CST, we are lucky to be following the pace and direction of the body.

Will the work go quickly or slowly? Will they see results right away? We can't predict; instead, we allow the process to unfold with our support.

What is the history here in the body? We don't know — what layers of a life will we touch? The practice of CST requires a certain humility — constant work with our own projections.

"When I first came to you," said a client I'd known for about nine years. "I was in physical pain. And I found relief. I mean, it's not like all pain went away, but I learned I could deal with, and respond to, what arose in terms of physical pain. Then I came back [a few years later] during a time I had a lot of

emotional pain. I processed a lot — and I learned ways to live with it. Some of it released, some is still present, but I relate to it differently. Now, I feel like I am doing similar work to what we've done before, but on a spiritual level."

Following, Not Leading

There is real work in stepping back and allowing a client's body to heal with your support. Most of that work is internal, but it sure is worth it.

As we take the time to listen and follow the body, we demonstrate to our clients the trust we have for their ability to heal. Sometimes our clients learn to trust their bodies as much as we do, which can be empowering and bring them a sense of agency.

I was working with a client who had a presentation of symptoms that have confounded doctors and had brought her extreme discomfort. I very much wanted to help this woman. I caught myself flipping through a virtual rolodex of anatomy and techniques, and then quickly remind myself: we don't lead in this work; we follow. It is in the moments where I meet her exactly where she is, and don't try to change anything, that lasting changes happen.

To Begin...

It probably can't be said enough (until you begin doing something about it, that is) that, when you put your hands on someone or approach them with therapeutic intentions, it's a good idea to begin with self-awareness. How are you today? Are you present, interested, distracted, expectant, worried, excited, or something else entirely? Are you comfortable in your own body? Have you clarified your intention in this moment?

I strongly encourage you to consider finding a practice that helps you develop this sense of self and boundaries, in order to enhance your connection and ability to work in the therapeutic field. Have a practice like this in place, and you're in a good place to begin supporting another person.

What's it like to bring CST techniques into your massage practice?

In my experience, practicing CST has been a journey of learning to trust, at deeper and deeper levels, in the body's healing abilities. This practice of trust has had an expansive effect in my own being as well as for my clients.

To be sure, helping others find relief is rewarding work. As a therapist, however, I've found that practicing light touch exerts a gentle internal pressure toward self-awareness, too. It's been fulfilling to embrace this ongoing educational journey.

Every client — every session even — feels like an exploration into the intricacies of life in another's body. An exploration that leads ever toward wholeness and integration.

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