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 your guide to health and healing naturally

by Mariëlle Renssen

What is craniosacral therapy?

Craniosacral therapy (CST) is an energy-based, deep-healing process that has evolved in the last century from the work of osteopaths. For decades, various forms of cranial manipulation have been used to treat a range of conditions and to improve overall body functioning. CST is based on the premise that the body is a unit, not a collection of parts. Although introduced to South Africa around 5 years ago, CST has only really established itself in the last 3 years, motivated by osteopathic physician and surgeon Dr John Upledger, founder of the Upledger Institute in Florida (USA), with a sister organisation in Scotland (UK).

The science behind the name

'Cranio' refers to the cranium, or head, and 'sacral' refers to the base of the spine and tailbone. The craniosacral system is comprised of the brain and spinal cord (the central nervous system), the cerebrospinal fluid that bathes the brain and spinal cord, the surrounding membranes or dura (enclosing the brain, spinal cord and cerebrospinal fluid) and the bones of the spine and skull that house these membranes. A rhythmic motion in the craniosacral system is created by the rise and fall of cerebrospinal fluid pressure.

Three membranes, known as the meningeal membranes, envelop our brain and spinal cord. The most important one is the outermost membrane, known as the dura mater. This attaches to, and lines, the inside of the skull, then travels all the way down the spinal column to where it attaches to the sacrum. It can be imagined to have a tadpole shape, and contains the cerebrospinal fluid.

Then there's the fascia. Every part of our body, from the microscopic, cellular level to nerves to our large organs and skeletal bones, is individually wrapped in tough, connective tissue called fascia. Like the dura, it's a system of tubes within tubes. Fascia attaches to our muscles, organs, and bones, as well as the dura mater. It's at the dura mater that the breakthrough was made, first by Dr William Sutherland and later pursued by Dr John Upledger, showing that within the body is a semi-closed hydraulic system in which the cerebrospinal fluid levels ebb and flow in rhythmic cycles.

The upper, central section of the cranium is clearly divided into two halves, the left and right parietal lobes, and to the fore of the skull is the frontal lobe; they are separated by cranial sutures. The astonishing fact is that the cranium, instead of being fused as per the conventional scientific view, is malleable and in continual motion – although hardly perceptible – expanding and contracting minutely at these sutures to ease the fluctuating pressure of cerebrospinal fluid production (500 - 700 ml of this fluid is produced by the body per day). The subtle movement, called the craniosacral rhythm by Upledger, is transmitted via the dura down to the sacrum; from the cranium and sacrum, practitioners can pick up the rhythm via connections of the fascia and dura to all the parts of the body.

Essentially, through touch and intention, the therapist can assist the 'body's own biological wisdom – an innate power to heal itself that's driven by a non-conscious intelligence'. These are the words of craniosacral therapist Harold Epstein, who continues, 'The body doesn't lie – the cerebral cortex does!'

'The "inner physician" is that part of the unconscious that knows all about our bodily functions and conditions; it also knows what must be done to enhance and improve these functions and conditions. Once a dialogue has been established with the inner physician, the process of deep self-healing can begin.' John Upledger

Where did it all start?

Dr John Upledger founded his research on work carried out in the early 1900s in Missouri (USA) by osteopathic student Dr William Sutherland. Intrigued by the careful design of the sutures in every human skull, Sutherland surmised that their role was to allow for cranial movement – despite the prevailing belief among anatomists that the skull bones are fused. With this technique (the Sutural Approach) the bones of the skull were manipulated to ease pressure and increase the mobility of the sacral bones. Claire Waumsley tells us that 'there are records of skull manipulation having been practised way back in time in Egypt and Peru, evidence that ancient cultures recognised a connection between cranial fissures and subtle respiratory motion'.

Being an enterprising student, Sutherland enlisted the help of his wife in a series of bizarre experiments

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he conducted on himself, using vice-like helmets to apply varying pressure for different lengths of time to specific areas of his head. She patiently recorded his mood swings, headaches, pain and co-ordination problems – and the results of these studies were published for the first time in the 1930s. Sutherland eventually developed a sophisticated system of diagnosis and treatment known as cranial osteopathy. While performing spinal surgery back in 1970, Upledger himself noticed that there was a rhythmical in-and-out movement of the membranous boundary, resembling what looked like some sort of hydraulic system. This membranous boundary was the dura mater.

Between 1975 and 1983, while working as a clinician-researcher and professor in the Department of Biomechanics at the Michigan State University Osteopathic College, Upledger mobilised a formidable multidisciplinary research team made up of anatomists, physiologists, biophysicists and bioengineers. Through extensive research and testing, they were able to establish a scientific basis for the existence of the craniosacral system. He developed CST, an approach that focuses primarily on manipulating the underlying membranes, or meninges.

So what can CST do?

There is much written today about energetic healing methods used to aid the release of 'energy blockages' within the body. Dr John Upledger and biophysicist Dr Zvi Karni together focused their research and clinical testing on the electrical changes that take place in the body while their craniosacral methods are being applied. They concluded that any physical trauma to the body, such as a blow or impact in an accident, as well as any emotional stress or tension, are forms of energy transferral into the tissue cells, where they get stored. If these energy blockages aren't cleared or released, they can lead to an imbalance in your physical health and may manifest as headaches, back pain, digestive disorders, and so on. Somato emotional release (SER) provides CST practitioners with the manual and verbal skills they require to help release these destructive patterns.

Since intercellular communication takes place via the fascia, and it is the pulsing of this connective tissue that the craniosacral therapist accesses, s/he can place his hands lightly on various points of the body and monitor the rhythmical movement in the craniosacral system. Once the body feels the support – and it is ready to release its stored cell traumas – it will soften and relax. When abnormal motion is detected the therapist locates the point of restricted movement and brings about a release by gently elongating and tractioning the meningeal membrane. This moment of release, called a 'therapeutic pulse', is sometimes outwardly visible, particularly if the patient is lying on an air mattress (sometimes used in training sessions). I watched such an instant as a therapeutic pulse occurring in a student-patient translated into quivering and vibrating of the mattress; the therapist was also rocking gently as the pulse was transmitted through his hands and body. With this release, some people experience various emotions and sometimes even a mental flash linked to the memory.

Craniosacral therapist Harold Epstein explains: 'As soon as the body senses it has a supportive environment in the form of focused and sensitive touch, coupled with clear intention – that is, the practitioner's mind is focused on the healing process (this aspect is very important) – it will move into its natural self-corrective mode, releasing stored body trauma'.

'In response to the scepticism of a psychologist, a physicist in the audience reminded us that if we could store a symphony on a piece of plastic tape, or a TV programme with colour and sound on plastic ... then something as complex as a muscle tissue could store the memory of an accident or an injury.' John Upledger, *Your Inner Physician and You*

The hands-on experience

I was drawn to CST as a result of a violent impact I had with a tree! Bracing my foot against the trunk to protect myself from the crash, I damaged the fat pads in my heel and had to undergo physiotherapy and ultrasound treatment. I'm a half-marathon runner, and when I started running again I experienced a constant clicking in my spine that seemed to originate from my left jaw! Reluctant to try anything as invasive as chiropractic, I was referred to craniosacral therapist, Harold Epstein. My healing sessions with Harold were utterly fascinating, and when after about five visits the spinal clicking had all but vanished, there was no turning back; I simply had to find out for myself how this worked.

The experience was mind-expanding and profound. Over a 2-day introductory CST course run by two craniosacral practitioners, Harold and his colleague Claire Waumsley, eight of us were skillfully and sensitively guided through the process of intuitively sensing and physically feeling the ebb and flow of the craniosacral rhythm. Using the technique of 'palpation' – developing our sense of touch to examine the body – it was amazing how, on the second day, we had already made strides in sensitising our hands to the pulsating motion of craniosacral fluid in the body, and even the shifting of one bone in relation to another! We practised 'listening in' to the body with our hands placed on specific areas, termed 'listening stations' by Upledger: the heels, front thighs, spine/ilium, front ribs, shoulders and cranium. The level of pressure applied to the body is surprisingly light; seldom is more than 5 g of weight necessary – that's

how a 50 cent coin feels on your skin!

Palpation, pulsation, sensation!

A couple of experiences stand out for me. We were applying the light touch described above at the 'listening stations', starting at the feet. It's hard to believe that cradling the heels gently in cupped hands can produce so many sensations; I both witnessed this and experienced it as a patient. Holding the heels, the trick is to focus inward, concentrating only on the pulsing motion in your hands; the heart pulse is usually easiest to identify, then there's the rhythmic rising and falling of the breathing (respiratory) pulse. Next is the art of sensing beyond those; tuning in to the quieter, subtler craniosacral rhythm. The pulse crept up on me unannounced, and it was utterly exhilarating. Then I was in the role of patient. Lying on my back completely relaxed, eyes closed, I had the sensation that both my feet were twisting ever so slowly, inexorably outward in the student-therapist's hands, until both little toes were hanging over her cradled hands. She confirmed with me that she herself was feeling the inner craniosacral rhythm. Then it felt as if slowly, involuntarily, my feet were twisting back to their starting position – it reminded me of the excruciatingly slow march of the dial on a clock timer. I shook with convulsive laughter – natural behaviour, we'd been warned, because with the release of energy, emotional stress or tension stored in the tissues there can also be an emotional reaction. A patient I later worked on lay with tears sliding down her face. Another patient's breathing increased, the rise and fall of her chest visibly quickening as her eyelids flickered wildly.

Yet more profound was a technique making use of cupped hands and supportive thumbs to cradle the patient's head close to where it connects with the first cervical vertebra (atlas bone) of the neck. With eyes closed and an intense inward focus, it is possible to eliminate the heart and breathing pulses from your awareness, and then experience the palpable sensation of the skull quietly widening, and ever so gently contracting again, under your fingers. For me it was an incredibly powerful feeling, an absolute wonderment to cradle this alive, expanding and contracting phenomenon in my hands. Once again we were experiencing the ebb and flow of the craniosacral rhythm; here, more than ever, we could feel the hydraulic functioning of the craniosacral system via the cranium as it expanded to release the pressure of the craniosacral fluid in the high production phase, then relaxed again during the decreased production phase. And for me, the proof that this healing system exists lies simply in the fact that I witnessed and experienced the wonder of it first-hand.

Where to find treatment

Treatment sessions can vary in length from 30 minutes to 2 hours, depending on how the body responds. It can be applied by one, two or multiple therapists for accelerated healing. CST practitioners trained by the Upledger Institute (Florida (USA), Scotland (UK)) are internationally recognised. Cape Town: Harold Epstein, tel. 021-433 0003; Claire Waumsley, tel. 022-451 2750; Johannesburg: Marcelle Wilken, tel. 011-7064 973 (9h00 – 14h00).

CST is practised by osteopaths, physiotherapists, massage therapists, chiropractors, occupational therapists, dentists and medical doctors.

CST can be used for

- Migraines
- Neck and back pain
- Central nervous system disorders
- Brain and spinal cord injuries
- Scoliosis
- Connective tissue disorders
- Post-traumatic stress
- Any physical, mental or emotional trauma
- Attention deficit disorder and
- Birth trauma.

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