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SpaTalk



Brain Waves

Will a session of craniosacral therapy put you in touch with your body's inner rhythm or heal past injuries? Listen up.... *By Ann Wycoff*

THE FIRST TIME I TRY CRANIOSACRAL therapy, I find myself in a thatch-roof cabana, my head cradled in the warm, sandalwood-scented hands of a buxom hippie at Two Bunch Palms, the spiritually fertile oasis in Desert Hot Springs, California. The relief I feel in my left shoulder and neck is impressive (as is the cost, \$125 for 90 minutes), and as she gently presses my occipital lobes and stretches my neck, she tells me the pesky knot on my left side is due to my intake of Coca-Cola. Hmmm.

Is craniosacral therapy just another trendy gimmick to spice up spa menus—or is it a mind-altering mystical experience that teaches the body how to heal itself? Practitioners claim that this technique taps into the body's internal message center, opening up blocked passages and reestablishing the “wave” of natural energy that allows the body to function properly. Craniosacral therapy is often referred to as “energy work,” and there's evidence that it does indeed help to relieve ailments such as stress,

migraines, and menstrual pain. But energy therapies can also be so abstract, with such random results and inflated claims, that it's difficult to recommend wholeheartedly, especially to spa-goers who may find greater value and pleasure in a simple, straightforward massage.

But I'm drawn in again on a trip to Hawaii, when I hear about Rebecca Goff, a practitioner who performs Ocean AquaCranial Massage at sunrise at the Four Seasons Resort Maui. My curiosity is piqued when I'm told that dol-

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SIMON WATSON/IMAGEBANK

phins often visit during the sessions. Up early, I don a wetsuit and head into the surf, and as the sun comes up, I'm floating effortlessly in Goff's arms, the natural rhythm of the small waves lulling me. Standing in waist-deep water, she gently places her hands at the base of my skull and sacrum. Slowly, she rocks and sways my legs and arms, my body undulating like a sea anemone. After 25 precious minutes, she pulls me from my trance-like state and escorts me to the beach. As I try to walk from the water, I topple over, pleasantly disoriented. Goff guides me to the sand where she covers me in blankets, and I slip off into a deep meditative state. Afterward, she asks me what happened to the left side of my body. I tell her about tearing a ligament while ski-

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ing and my subsequent knee surgery. Craniosacral therapy, she explains, would help release my body's trauma; it's clear that I am still holding physical and emotional pain from that event.

For the next few days, I'm acutely aware of minor shifts within my body. My gait is a little lighter, my muscles softer, and my head, too, is in a dreamy state. Something has resonated deeply within me, beyond the physical. And while no dolphins appeared that day, I am hooked, determined to explore a therapy that claims to help everything from autism and insomnia to migraines, spinal curvature, digestive problems, and sciatica. Despite the fact that I have no clear sense of how craniosacral therapy works, my experience was as restorative as a good

massage while being spiritually rewarding as well.

Explaining the Unexplainable

One of the main principles of craniosacral therapy is the belief that the body has a natural internal intelligence that helps it function. "There are obvious movements in the body such as breath and the heartbeat," explains Hugh Milne, author of *The Heart of Listening: A Visionary Approach to Craniosacral Work*. "But there is also a third system, which is more subtle, called the cranial wave. I like the Native American view that there is a wind outside and one moving inside, called the 'little wind.' The ancient Chinese called it 'chi,' the Hindus, 'prana.' Craniosacral work is a holistic

practice that uses extremely light finger pressure to optimize the movement pattern of this wave."

So what exactly is this wave? Traditional medicine tells us the brain produces cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) that circulates within the head and up and down the spine. Some believe that the fluctuation of this fluid causes a rhythm that can be measured—the wave moves slowly, 8 to 14 times per minute. As the fluid fluctuates, the bones and tissues in the body move. However, stress, physical problems, or injuries can affect the body's natural rhythm and create "areas of holding" that restrict the flow.

During craniosacral work, the client lays on a table, fully dressed, as a therapist lightly touches the person's body, making delicate adjustments to the bones and opening up the energy field with gentle palpations. The session generally lasts from 45 to 90 minutes, during which the practitioner "lis-

SPA SAVVY

As with many energy therapies, it can be a challenge to understand just what's going on during a craniosacral session. For those who are curious to learn more about its inner workings—and potentially enhance your treatment—we've sourced some useful books and workshops for your consideration.

READING LIST

Craniosacral Therapy: Touchstone for Healing, by John E. Upledger (North Atlantic Books).

The Heart of Listening: A Visionary Approach to Craniosacral Work, by Hugh Milne (North Atlantic Books).

WORKSHOPS

The Upledger Institute (561/622-4334, www.upledger.com) offers courses and certification in craniosacral therapy at its Palm Beach Gardens offices and at other locations nationwide. Check the website for classes and locations.

Based in Big Sur, California, the Milne Institute (831/667-2323, www.milneinstitute.com) conducts daylong introductions and four-day seminars in cities across the U.S.

tens” to detect the body’s natural wave in order to discover what it needs to heal itself.

While traditions like bone setting and the laying on of hands are precursors, craniosacral work stems from osteopathy, a system that treats ailments by manipulating displaced bones. In the 19th century, American osteopath William Sutherland focused his studies on the bones of the skull, discovering how adjustments to movements of the cranial bones were linked with changes in consciousness. Traditional osteopaths tend to limit their work to the mechanical realm, using cranial osteopathy for headaches, whiplash, TMJ, and back pain.

But in the early '70s, osteopath John Upledger recognized the wide-reaching effects of craniosacral therapy on the body and psyche. In his book, *Craniosacral Therapy, Touchstone for Natural Healing*, the doctor, who is known for his work with autistic children and Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, explains how practitioners at his Upledger Institute help clients find their inner physician. By listening to the flow, one can detect blockages and problems in the cranial wave, thus allowing the client’s body to instruct itself how to heal. Often patients relive the emotions attached to traumas or injury and release these embedded feelings for good.

“My own practice has gone from almost entirely medical to the spiritual realm,” says Milne, who runs the Milne Institute in Big Sur, California. “Craniosacral work is a sensitive hands-on bodywork with a meditative use of the inner eye,” he says. Milne also believes that it allows you to tap into the collective consciousness and can be a conduit to your

HANDS ON HEALING

Elevate the restorative benefits of craniosacral therapy in the peaceful surroundings of one of these top spas.

Esalen: In the consciousness-raising environment of this spiritual oasis, Craniosacral Therapy (\$125, 90 minutes) is a transforming experience for receptive participants.

Big Sur, California, (831) 667-3004, www.esalen.org

Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea: Along with a craniosacral treatment inside the spa (\$115, 50 minutes), there’s Ocean AquaCranial Massage (\$115, 25 minutes) done while you’re floating in the sea at dawn.

Maui, Hawaii, (808) 874-8000, www.fourseasons.com/maui

Golden Door Spa at the Boulders: At this desert sanctuary, Craniosacral’s (\$130, 50 minutes) gentle holding techniques relieve muscle tension and energy blockages.

Carefree, Arizona, (480) 595-3500, www.wyndham.com

The Broadmoor: With a promise to inspire deep and lasting relaxation, this subtle, 50-minute (\$110) realignment of the skull, spine, and sacrum leaves you feeling calm and rejuvenated.

Colorado Springs, Colorado, (800) 634-7711, www.thebroadmoor.com

Two Bunch Palms: Begin to restore the free flow of cerebrospinal fluid during a relaxing one-hour session (\$90) in an outdoor cabana surrounded by desert palms.

Desert Hot Springs, California, (760) 329-8791, www.twobunchpalms.com

dream-body, the mind-body-spirit unity, or soul. Craniosacral sessions can also be part of a spiritual practice. “We need our altered states. We used to get there by dancing, singing, going to church, telling stories in the longhouses, but most of those traditions are gone,” he explains.

Dropping In

While a session or two at a spa may not tune you in to your body’s wave or release the blockage from a long-ago sports injury, the benefits of this spiritually attuned therapy are immediately healing, as I find during a session with Victoria Sloan, a Santa Monica craniosacral practitioner and student of Milne’s. During our hour-long session, I begin to understand the concepts of “unwinding” and “dropping in.” After holding my occipital bone and sacrum for a

long, profoundly relaxing time, Victoria goes to the end of the table and lightly touches the top of my feet. Suddenly, my sacrum sinks into the table, seemingly three feet deep. We both feel the powerful shift, which leaves my body simultaneously heavy and light. Next she holds my head, which begins to slowly move to the right in an arc and then back to the left. My body guides her rather than the other way around. I feel tremendous relief: It’s as though years of accumulated stress finally seep out of me. My neck undulates back and forth dramatically. Tears come to my eyes. The image of my body, twisted and coiled, dissipates as I feel it begin to heal itself and let go. When I leave, I am remarkably “high.” I float out the door with a newly elongated neck and an elevated spirit.