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A Daughter's Wild Ride

Treatment for a riding injury heals new and old wounds.

BY CONSTANCE HALE

What was I thinking?

At age 42, how could I assume that I could just climb on a horse and go galivanting off into the Virginia woods? Of course, I was with my father, a practiced equestrian. But how could I think that after not having been on a horse for several years, I could control a large gelding that had been pent up during fierce spring rains?

Well, I got my comeuppance. Mid-gallop, the horse spooked and jumped sideways. I came home to California with a fist-size bruise on my right knee and a torn anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in my left. You'd think that would have been enough to convince me to lie low.

But as soon as I was out of a knee brace, there I was, back at hula class. At first I sat obediently, leg splayed before me, watching as my classmates learned a new dance. After a couple of weeks, I tried just the arm movements, standing still as a tree. But you can't really do arms-only hula, so I started tentatively bending my legs and

swaying my hips. But there is no tentative in hula. The music takes over, you fall into the story, you forget about your bum knee.

So, six weeks after that fall off the horse, I had not just a bum knee but a bum hip. In fact, my right hip hurt worse than my left knee. It hurt when I hulaed. It hurt when I rose from a chair. It hurt when I walked to the store.

I didn't want to go back to the orthopedic surgeon who'd first examined my knee. Soft-tissue injuries generally make Western doctors shrug their shoulders and say, "Rest and take anti-inflammatories." In fact, the orthopedist I'd originally seen denied I had anything more than a bruise; it wasn't until I insisted he order an MRI that he discovered a tear in my ACL. So I tried my primary care physician, who at least gave me a diagnosis.

He said I had bursitis, a condition caused by inflammation in one of many

tiny fluid-filled sacs—bursae—located in joints. Injury, overuse, and bad positioning (in my case, compensating for that bad knee) can turn the body's little cushions into giant boulders of pain. Bursitis usually heals in a couple of weeks, my doctor said, as long as you take a break from what caused the problem. And oh yes, rest and take anti-inflammatories.

But that didn't work either, so I called my acupuncturist, who's helped me through this kind of problem before. When I explained that the bursitis followed a knee injury, she said that a new form of therapy she's added to her practice might be just the ticket.

In a quiet suite in San Francisco, just a block from Golden Gate Park, she ushers me into her treatment room, dominated by a massage table, a sunny window, and a rice-paper screen hiding the accoutrements of acupuncture. Today she decides to hold off on the



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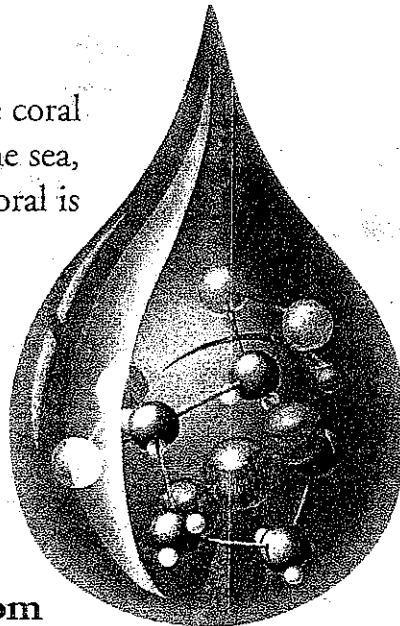
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Chinese medicine, concentrating instead on craniosacral massage.

As I lie face up on the table, she gently grasps my ankles, lifting and pulling my legs. My left leg freaks out, pulling back from her inquiring touch. "Your accident was really traumatic, wasn't it?" she asks softly. If you want to heal your knee, she suggests, you may need to heal your heart.

I breathe a sigh of relief over this more holistic approach. And yet I can't help feeling underwhelmed. After releasing my legs, my acupuncturist places her hands ever so delicately on various skull bones, under the nape of my neck and around my tailbone. This is nothing like massage. No deep-tissue kneading here. We're talking seriously subtle. Granted, the pressure is relaxing—sort of shiatsu lite—but how on earth will this help my hip?

Then, without warning, my right knee bends ever so slightly and my entire leg kicks alive. My hip joint relaxes, and my leg flutters into a new position. "What's *that*?" I ask. She smiles.

This mysterious method was developed by osteopathic physician John E. Upledger, who first observed the rhythmic movement of the craniosacral system while assisting at a neck surgery. This system, he holds, extends from the skull (cranium) all the way down to the tailbone (sacrum) and includes the bony structures of the head, face, and spine, as well as the surrounding membranes and fluids.

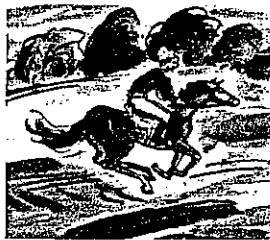
Like the pulse of the cardiovascular system, Upledger found, the craniosacral system has a rhythm that can be felt throughout the body. Using a light touch—generally no more than the weight of a nickel—practitioners monitor this rhythm to pinpoint the source of obstruction or stress. Then they assist the natural movement of the fluid and related soft tissue to help the body self-correct.

"We don't treat a diagnosis," explains Francine Hammond, a licensed massage therapist at the Upledger Institute in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida.

"When we put our hands on, we are asking your body what's important right *now*. When your craniosacral rhythm stops suddenly, that tells us we're on the right track."

In the case of bursitis, Hammond adds, the hands-on contact with the soft tissue helps relax tightness in surrounding muscles—a splinting that is a natural response to injury but can impede healing if it persists. "The very light touch also allows us to mobilize the fluid system, which increases circulation, brings in fresh blood to an area, and spurs immune-system cells to clean, rebuild, and repair tissues."

But craniosacral therapists also believe the emotions associated with an



injury get recorded in cell tissue, which is why my acupuncturist directs my attention to my feelings. Suspending dis-

Something was not right on that ride with Dad.

belief, I decide to get a handle on the true trauma of the fall.

Something was not right on that ride with Dad. It took all our strength to keep the horses under control, and they were frequently spooked by large puddles and the surging Potomac River. Heading up one hill, Dad's horse started to buck, and my father was

personal **journey**

thrown. Yet when we turned onto a gravel path heading home, he suggested we canter. This was odd: My father is the one, after all, who taught me never to canter horses on the last stretch of a ride. "Won't they bolt for home?" I asked. "Nah," he answered.

But bolt they did. I panicked as the muscular flank of my father's thoroughbred jumped into action ahead. Battling my own horse, I lost a stirrup. Thoughts flashed before me: I'd lose control of my horse; I'd lose my balance; I'd risk serious injury as the horse accelerated. I was terrified, and furious at my father for getting me into this danger. That's when the horse jumped sideways and I ~~st~~ tumbled down onto my knees, the gravel gouging my jeans.

Once I let my still-turbulent feelings surface, I couldn't overlook my father's

error in judgment. He hadn't protected me, as a father should a daughter. When the horses bolted, he just rode away, abandoning me to my fate. This had happened before. I felt deserted by my father after he and my mother divorced and he plunged further into his military career and his new family. Later, in his civilian life, he became a workaholic; the times when I needed him most, he was often preoccupied. *If you want to heal your knee, you may need to heal your heart.* Trembling, I called Dad to talk over my feelings.

"I know it's not completely rational," I began, gulping back tears. I've always soldiered on with my father, never admitting my deepest fear that his devotion was fleeting. "But I've always felt abandoned by you," I managed to blurt out, hardly believing I'd finally confessed.

"But Connie," he replied, emotion flooding his voice. "I've always adored you, and I'd never, ever abandon you."

This was, of course, what I'd always longed to hear, though I also realized in that moment that my father would probably never meet my expectations. More important, perhaps, was that my fear had finally come out of the shadows. This was the first step in healing my heart.

A week later, I walk out of the acupuncturist's office after my third and final treatment. The last trace of the bursitis, which had persisted for six weeks, has disappeared. My acupuncturist mentioned a new Hawaiian café a few blocks away, and it feels so great to be out of pain that I decide to give myself a little rein to explore it. I cruise up Irving Street rather than hopping on the streetcar, and after a few blocks, I notice how light my spirit feels. I want to skip. Instead, I stop by Kaleo Café, buy a Kona coffee, settle into a plush sofa, listen to the Hawaiian music, and celebrate my happy hip. ☐

Constance Hale is an Oakland, Calif.-based freelance writer and the former managing editor of *Health* magazine.