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Going with the Flow through Cranial Sacral Therapy

by Jonn Salovaara

The feeling of peace and calm persisted despite a long day that included a morning of physically hard landscaping work, a tensely hurried drive from the city to Oak Park, a drive back into the city to meet my wife's friend from out of town complete with an attempt to park near the Art Institute, a rush-hour drive from the loop up to Hamlin Park on Wellington and Damen with my son for his baseball practice, and a rush-hour drive over to my brother-in-law's to do some emergency pruning on his and my sister's winter-blighted boxwood bushes.

What magic enforced this center of calm in the midst of a wildly crazy day? Cranial sacral therapy, a gentle form of energy work practiced with a very light touch on a fully clothed and reclining client.

Cranial sacral therapy focuses on the cerebrospinal fluid, which is produced and absorbed by the body on a regular rhythmical basis. Here's how it works: inside your cranium, there is a membrane called the dura mater that adheres to the bone. Beneath the dura mater, before the next layer of membrane, is cerebrospinal fluid. Similarly, in the spine, there is the bone of the vertebra, a layer of membrane within the vertebra and then cerebrospinal fluid before the next layer of membrane. In both places, the cranium and the spine, there is a total of three layers of membrane between bone and the brain or spinal cord.

Cranial sacral therapists believe that irregularities, or glitches, in the regular flow of the cerebrospinal fluid that lubricates these membranes can cause difficulties for parts of the body related to the area where the glitch is. It's as if the skeletal system is one of those magic drawing boards that has some kind of liquid beneath a layer of plastic; if that layer dries out, the system is useless. So cranial sacral therapists will examine the body of a client for indications of problems and will use the weight of the head while holding their hands beneath it, as well as a hand beneath the sacrum (the last three vertebrae fused into one bone just above the coccyx or tailbone) to improve the flow of the cerebrospinal fluid. The process of examining for glitches involves very light touch and testing the range of motion of the limbs.

The whole procedure often is done with the client lying on a massage table. In my case, the room was lit softly and soothing music played. Tom Tepe, the therapist I visited, describes his work as "a dance, in a way, almost like the two unconscious (of client and therapist) talking; there is an intuitive aspect to it." The therapist is "more of a follower and facilitator rather than change agent." Talking is also a part of the therapy. Tepe asked me about what I had been experiencing during the hour and commented on some of my responses. For the most part, I'd been concentrating on the idea Tom introduced right before he began, about the body wanting to heal itself.

Dr. Elaine Stocker has been practicing cranial sacral therapy since the 1970s. She explains to new clients that by participating in therapy "You're making a good home for the central nervous system as it exists in the head and the spine and the body." She calls the cranial rhythm "the moving tide of life," saying that when the movement of cerebrospinal fluid from



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the head through the spinal column, into the cranium and back is "full and complete, these fluids flow through the whole body and provide the tissues with nutrition and information." Stocker says she can feel the cerebrospinal fluid at many different places around a client's body, including the fingers and legs. She specializes in the use of cranial sacral therapy with children and mothers.

Ed Spencer integrates a number of therapies in his practice; he learned cranial sacral techniques from an English osteopath named Peter Armitage. "By gentle manipulation of the cranial bones, spinal, and sacral bones, you can affect the overall body function and specific organ or muscle function through the central nervous system," he says.

John Upledger, D.O., founder of the Upledger Institute and popularizer of cranial sacral therapy, traces his faith in cranial sacral to his assistance at a neurosurgeon's operation on a patient who had plaque on his dura mater membrane. Upledger found it impossible to hold the membrane still for the surgeon and thus had an indelible impression of the pulsing nature of cerebrospinal fluid. He went on to see numerous dramatic improvements in patients with cerebral palsy, hyperactivity, and dyslexia, when he used techniques designed to improve the action of cerebrospinal fluid.

There is currently no state licensure or certificate for cranial sacral therapy; different methods of training offer their own certification to those who complete their courses. The best way to find an effective therapist is to ask around among friends and seek referrals from complementary therapists, who are likely to share knowledge with healers in related fields. If my experience is any indication of cranial sacral's potential, you may want to start asking around today!

Resources

Craniosacral Therapy of Chicago, 773-262-4700


Richard Popp, 847-604-4510

Ed Spencer, Integrative Therapies, 773-442-0038

Beth Stein, 773-271-8538

Elaine Stocker and Bob Kearney, Healing Hands, 773-281-7100

Tom Tepe, Positive Life Center, 708-848-0400

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