



Gently does it

When stress left Brooke Shields with a frozen jaw, she turned to cranio-sacral therapy for help. She talks to *Victoria McKee*

Brooke Shields lopes into the Upper West Side office of Dr Karen Erickson, a cranio-sacral therapist. She is almost unrecognisable in dreadlocks, with an unmade-up face (revealing a small spot on her forehead), and wearing a huge puffy coat.

But she is recognised, of course. 'It always happens,' she says, with a shrug, when a woman comes up to her in the waiting room. She chats happily with the fan about her dreadlocks (adopted for her latest film, *Black and White*, about hip-hop culture in New York) before going in for treatment. The woman stares after her in admiration, marvelling out loud to the room at large, 'So she gets spots, too.'

Had Brooke heard her, she would undoubtedly have laughed. 'Life is too short to take yourself too seriously' is the philosophy of this former child star who has matured into an apparently well-balanced woman. 'I've always found self-deprecation is the ultimate diffuser. If you're singled out as a special entity for how you look or what your profession is, it creates an instant barrier. One of the best ways to get through it is to laugh at yourself. I learnt that as a kid.'

She learnt a lot as a kid, growing up in New York and on screen, playing a pre-teen prostitute in Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* and two years later, aged only fourteen, revealing almost all in the film *The Blue Lagoon*.

When you have had to deal with roles like those, and the pressures of intense media interest in you, both as

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a child star with a stage-mother-turned-manager, and latterly as the wife of tennis-player Andre Agassi (from whom she is now separated), you had better be able to laugh.

But until recently, laughing – and even eating – caused Brooke physical pain. ‘It got to the point where I just couldn’t open my mouth wide enough to eat an apple,’ says Brooke. ‘Someone would have to “start” my apples for me.’ She was suffering from TMJ syndrome, named after the temporal mandibular joints on each side of the jaw. ‘I used to grind my teeth – I broke my braces once in high school – and my jaw had frozen tight, because it’s one of the places where I keep my stress.

‘I’m a very physically manifested person. You can tell I’m under a lot of pressure right now because my skin changes.’ Hence the spot. ‘Having this kind of bodywork therapy is the only sure-fire way of getting me back on track.’

It takes 45 minutes of Dr Erickson’s gentle hands-on treatment to realign Brooke’s jaw, straighten her hips, and lengthen her spine. ‘You feel like you’ve gone back to the womb,’ Brooke enthuses. ‘She has such a nurturing, maternal feeling.’

Dr Erickson is actually a chiropractor, but she practises cranio-sacral therapy instead of traditional ‘bone crunching’ much of the time. As a holistic practitioner, she also recommends nutritional supplements and other therapies for patients when necessary. Those who visit her regularly claim she makes them feel as if they have been in a health spa for a week.

‘I’ve always been interested in exploring different pathways to health,’ says Dr Erickson. It was one of those pathways that led her to the guru of cranio-sacral therapy, the osteopath John Upledger, who developed the therapy and with whom Dr Erickson trained.

Dr Upledger describes his therapy as taking ‘a very soft-touch,

hands-on therapeutic approach that involves the enhancement of natural bodily function. The important thing it does is enhance fluid movement through every cell in the body.’ The effects can be fundamental and far-reaching.

Through subtly stimulating the circulation of spinal and lymphatic fluids and the nerve endings, as well as the vital pressure points in the head (cranium) and lower spine (sacrum – particularly rich in nerve endings), the whole body can be treated. These key elements, according to Dr Upledger, govern its functioning and general well-being.

Although Dr Upledger is an osteopath, he describes his therapy as ‘much less invasive than cranial osteopathy’, and contrasts his gentler approach with that of osteopaths who ‘like to see the bones moving’.

Despite its name, in cranio-sacral therapy, every area of the body is worked on – not just the head and sacrum. Even the feet and legs are manipulated, as having a condition such as bunions or bad knees can throw other parts of the body out of alignment. ‘Through cranio-

sacral therapy, the practitioner can feel where the problem is manifesting itself – a problem in a foot can affect the knee or the hip – and clear the blockage,’ Dr Upledger explains.

It was Brooke’s Los Angeles chiropractor, Dr Jeffrey Rochford, who discovered her TMJ syndrome and first used some

cranio-sacral techniques on her.

‘When I started with Dr Erickson, she didn’t know anything about the previous diagnosis,’ Brooke remembers. ‘She suddenly said, “Do you mind if I work inside your mouth?” There’s nothing more

painful than when she works on the point, but it’s a precise pain; it’s focused, and then it’s over.’

Brooke first went to Dr Rochford after being hit on the head while filming an episode of the comedy series *Suddenly Susan* (shown in the UK on Channel Four and Sky One), in which the actors were playing basketball. ‘By the end of the day, I

couldn’t turn my head – I was immobile. The next day, I wasn’t able to work and the producer sent me to Dr Rochford.’

When work on the film *The Weekend* (about a B-movie actress and her domineering mother) brought Brooke to New York, Dr Rochford recommended that she visit Dr Erickson.

‘Their manner is very different, but their technique is similar,’ observes Brooke. ‘I was afraid of coming to New York without knowing someone who could work on me. I didn’t want to try someone randomly, because, when I have had my back cracked or something, I’ve usually been in more pain afterwards.

‘When I’ve been to Dr Erickson, I feel there’s more oxygen going through my body. I feel taller; I can breathe better,’ she explains.

Brooke acknowledges that she has long had a desire to feel in control, so surrendering herself to cranio-sacral therapy took some effort initially. ‘The whole concept of not being in control has always made me panic, but there’s nothing more annoying than being “off centre”.

‘With actors, it doesn’t matter how good you are if you’re not on time or on your mark or in your life. When my spine is centred, as it is through this therapy, I feel centred and more in control of my life in general.’ □

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