



CAN CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY OFFER RELIEF FOR POST-CONCUSSION SYMPTOMS?

NFL's Ricky Williams Says It Can

By Karrie Osborn

“Each NFL team should have at least one craniosacral therapist on staff, if not more.” That’s the proclamation of former NFL running back Ricky Williams, who believes profoundly in craniosacral therapy (CST) and its benefits for those living with post-concussion syndrome.

After experiencing hands-on CST work in an NFL locker room in 2006, Williams quickly immersed himself in understanding CST and took four courses over the next year. When he completed a week-long CST intensive at the Upledger Institute before his 2009 football season, everything changed. “I ended up having one of my best seasons in the NFL,” says Williams, who played with the New Orleans Saints, Miami Dolphins, and Baltimore Ravens during his storied football career. “I know a lot of it had to do with that week-long intensive I went to explore. It allowed me to be a better football player.”

But Williams had yet to realize that the reason he felt so much better, the reason his performance was so greatly enhanced, was largely because CST was addressing the post-concussion syndrome symptoms he didn’t even know he had.

RICKY WILLIAMS CONCUSSION ...

*“Think of the body - not as a mechanistic machine
but rather as a system of intelligence.”*

*Dr. John E. Upledger
1932 - 2012*

Ricky Williams and the Upledger Institute hosted two intensive craniosacral therapy (CST) programs in 2014 for retired football players diagnosed with post-concussion syndrome. These programs showed promise in the areas of pain relief, improvements in memory and cognition, and the ability to sleep, enough so to warrant further research. To hear firsthand how CST helped these athletes, watch this video from the Upledger Institute.

What is a Concussion?

A concussion is a mild traumatic brain injury that usually happens after a blow to the head, causing the brain to move rapidly inside the skull. For most people, symptoms occur within the first 7–10 days. It’s estimated that 1.6–3.8 million sports and recreation related concussions occur each year in the US.¹

Note

1. Brain Injury Research Institute, “What You Need to Know About Brain Injuries and Concussions,” accessed August 2019, www.protectthebrain.org/FAQs.aspx.

Post-Concussion Symptoms¹

According to the Mayo Clinic, symptoms of post-concussion syndrome include:

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Insomnia
- Loss of concentration and memory
- Ringing in the ears
- Blurry vision
- Noise and light sensitivity

Note

1. Mayo Clinic, “Post-Concussion Symptoms,” accessed August 2019, www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-concussion-syndrome/symptoms-causes/syc-20353352#targetText=Post%2Dconcussion%20syndrome%20is%20a,a%20blow%20to%20the%20head.

A CONCUSSION CULTURE

Concussions are now an important part of the NFL’s player-safety conversations, but that wasn’t always the case. Growing up in football programs, Williams says you just learned to deal with getting hit—hard. “It was my nature, that unless my arm was hanging off, I would be on the field.” He remembers some of the biggest hits he’s taken—one where he walked to the wrong sideline afterward and another where he thought he was in a video game as he sat sidelined on the bench after a blow to the head. He estimates that he received a minor concussion, on average, every other game. And the ones where he was seriously impacted? “I would say about 12.”

When you consider how many major and minor head traumas professional athletes experience, Williams reasons that it’s justification enough for having CST available in the locker room as a resource. Williams explains further: “There is this thing we go through in training camp in those first couple of days, when you get that first helmet-to-helmet hit. You have a horrible headache for about four days. Either it goes away ... or you get used to it—and that’s just part of it.” The players would often laugh at each other as they came stumbling off the field, the effects of “getting their bell rung” displayed fully. “It’s not funny now,” Williams says. “We didn’t know how serious the threats were to our health.”

The conversation with Williams shifts to Junior Seau, a beloved 20-year veteran of the game who committed suicide in 2012 at the age of 43. Seau shot himself in the chest, similar to NFL player Dave Duerson whose suicide note explained why he hadn’t shot himself in the head. Duerson wanted his brain intact so it could be studied for trauma after his death. Like Duerson, Seau was given the same postmortem diagnosis of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a progressive, neurodegenerative disease caused by repeated head injuries. CTE is known to worsen over time and is prevalent in athletes who participate in contact sports like boxing, football, and rugby.

“I played with Junior. He was an amazing man and an amazing football player.” What’s hard, Williams says, is that even with an ever-expanding list of NFL players significantly impacted by concussions,¹ “no one is talking about a cure or a treatment. They talk about protection, but that doesn’t help players at the end of their career or those who are retired.” He believes this is the group of men who have been forgotten. “What happens is guys (with CTE) start to experience the diminishment of their mental acuity. They see that it will only get worse ... and not wanting to put yourself or your family through that. It’s unfortunate.”

But Williams says what he’s certain of is that craniosacral therapy can help. By increasing the movement of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), blood, and interstitial fluids, and by reducing inflammation throughout the brain and body, craniosacral therapy has brought relief to those suffering for decades with symptoms of CTE. “Letting people know there are ways to receive treatment where you can start to imagine a future when things can get better.” That’s how he sees the place for CST and what it can offer.



Because of his belief in the ability of CST, Ricky Williams trained as a craniosacral therapist. Here, he’s giving some CST time to his wife, Linnea.

PROVIDING HOPE

Having experienced the beneficial impact of CST for himself, Williams wanted to expose others to the work. That’s when the Ricky Williams Foundation and the John E. Upledger Foundation partnered to create intensive programs for football players diagnosed with post-concussion syndrome. The project came together quickly, with Williams inviting former players to participate, and the Upledger Institute providing therapists to deliver the work. A handful of football players came from around the country to join the week-long intensive. They all just wanted to feel better.

The results? Data gathered from these intensives showed the subjects had statistically greater improvements in pain intensity, range of motion, memory,

cognition, and sleep after a week of CST and other adjunct therapies.² But Williams had his own markers of success. On one of the last days of the program, the players and therapists went out for dinner and a drink. The jubilant group ended up on the dance floor, Williams recalls. One of the players told Williams it was the first time he’d been able to lift his arms for years. But beyond the physical, Williams saw something in his brothers that told him this program was valuable. After a week of intensive CST therapy, participants had found something that had been lost. “All the guys left with hope. They invested a week of their lives and they saw it generated a tangible, real change in their sense of well-being and their hope for a future of feeling well,” he says.

“For me, the one thing that became really important was the word *hope*.” For Williams, that’s all the proof he needed.

Notes

1. For a list of NFL players who have been diagnosed with CTE, some posthumously, go to: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_NFL_players_with_chronic_traumatic_encephalopathy.
2. G. Wetzler et al., “Craniosacral Therapy and Visceral Manipulation: A New Treatment Intervention for Concussion Recovery,” *Medical Acupuncture* 29, no. 4 (2017): 239–248.

6 Karrie Osborn is senior editor of *Massage & Bodywork* magazine.

For more info on craniosacral therapy or the Upledger Institute’s concussion program, visit www.upledger.org.