

CranioSacral Therapy for Decreasing Stress and Improving Fertility

By Karen Axelrod, BA, CST-D
www.karenaxelrod.com

To understand how CranioSacral Therapy can help improve fertility, it is important to understand how the central nervous system works. While there are many reasons why a couple might have difficulty becoming pregnant, one reason has to do with stress levels and hormones present in the future mom's body.

When we experience chronic, ongoing stress, our nervous system is in the "fight-or-flight" (or *sympathetic*) state. When we are relaxed and stress-free, our body is in the *parasympathetic* state. The parasympathetic state is what allows us to rest, digest, and reproduce. This is the exact opposite of the sympathetic state, which prepares our body to fight, flee, or even freeze in response to perceived danger.

This hardwired stress reflex is as ancient as the human race and is present in all mammals. When facing true danger, the last thing we need in order to escape is to rest up, digest food, or make a baby. We need to get out of harm's way! Escape is facilitated when the sympathetic nervous system activates the release of stress hormones, which help flush the muscles with blood, increase heart rate, and prepare the body to fight or flee in order to remain safe. When the danger has passed, the normal response is to go back into a parasympathetic state and get on with our lives – at least until the next "threat" appears.

When we experience ongoing or extreme stress, however – perhaps due to a traumatic event or day-to-day life challenges that have spiraled out of control – our body spends more time in the sympathetic state. On one

level, our nervous system does not recognize the difference between being chased by a tiger in the forest and being plagued by modern financial woes. Our body responds to different types of stress in a uniform way. If this sounds familiar to you, you might notice that it is hard to sleep or your digestion become disrupted when you are stressed out. Reproductive capabilities become compromised as well due to the dysregulation of hormones in this high-stress state.

A 2014 U.S. study published in the journal *Human Reproduction* found that highly stressed women "took 29 percent longer to get pregnant compared to other women and [that] their risk of infertility doubled." To increase the chances of getting pregnant, the lead researcher says, "eliminating stressors before trying to become pregnant might shorten the time couples need to become pregnant in comparison to ignoring stress." A U.K. study published around the same time found similar results when surveying couples undergoing in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments.

Another fertility-related area to consider is certainly the pelvic floor and abdominal region. Stress creates muscle tension. We've all felt this in our shoulders, neck, or jaw after working long hours to meet a deadline. Or maybe you've felt tension in your low back, stomach, or legs. If the pelvic muscles are always in a slightly contracted state due to stress (i.e., ready to "fight or flee"), this



could lead to a misaligned pelvic structure, tipped uterus, or twisted fallopian tubes. Misalignment and chronic tension in the low back or pelvic floor also adversely affect nerves and blood supply to the reproductive organs, making it hard to conceive or maintain a pregnancy. This, of course, ties back into our nervous system. Until the body feels “safe” and is assured that the “danger” has passed, we will not move out of fight-or-flight and into a relaxed state that ultimately facilitates reproduction.

Another study published in 2012 in the *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association* found that fertility rates improved for 60 percent of subjects after manual therapy was applied to the pelvic region. Despite the small number of subjects in the study, the author believes that “manual therapy could potentially be used as a first course of treatment for infertile patients considering hormone therapy, intrauterine insemination (IUI), or IVF treatments.”

Because of its inherently relaxing nature, CranioSacral Therapy (CST) can help women reduce internal stress and negotiate the transition into proper parasympathetic functioning to enable conception. A CST therapist uses gentle hands-on techniques to release restrictions within the musculoskeletal and nervous systems. She may also incorporate guided imagery and other relaxation techniques so clients can learn to identify and self-regulate stress before it escalates. CST is effective in helping women address any negative

emotions (such as fear or worry) associated with pregnancy, and it helps rid the body of residual tissue memory of past emotional or physical trauma – some of which may relate to previous pregnancies, births, or a complicated conception process.



During the course of treatment, as the body begins to soften and drop deeper into parasympathetic states of relaxation – and *remain* there for longer and longer periods of time between CST sessions – the ability to rest, digest, and reproduce will be restored. As underlying tension begins to dissipate bodywide, all the bones, muscles, organs, and nerves of the reproductive system may eventually regain optimal function to support fertility, conception, and a healthy, full-term pregnancy.

About CranioSacral Therapy

CranioSacral Therapy is a gentle manual therapy that enhances the function of your craniosacral system — i.e., the membranes and cerebrospinal fluid that surround and protect the brain and spinal cord. CST boosts the body’s natural healing processes to improve operation of the central nervous system, dissipate negative effects of stress, and enhance overall health and well-being. The work can be profoundly relaxing, exhilarating, deeply moving, or involve resolution of old “issues.” Through gentle cranial manipulation, tissue unwinding, dialoging, imagery, and SomatoEmotional Release, CST can effect not only profound structural change within the body, but also mental and emotional change.

Karen Axelrod is a Diplomate-certified CranioSacral Therapist based in Redondo Beach, CA. She also is an Upledger Institute CranioSacral Therapy instructor. Her treatments integrate body, mind, and spirit to help clients recognize and reconnect to inner resources necessary for deep healing at a core level. Please visit her website at www.karenaxelrod.com for more information on her practice.