

Cultivating Neutrality

Grow Your
Therapeutic Presence

BY ROBYN SCHERR



body therapists are a caring bunch. Our clients come to us with stresses and strains, pain and injury, and we want to help them get better. But what, exactly, does “better” mean? How can we know what wellness looks like for them? When we follow our well-meaning impulses to help without looking at what’s behind those impulses, we can miss the very cues that allow us to assist our clients’ healing processes, and actually may end up standing in their way.

As a craniosacral therapist, I work within this paradox every day: to be most effective, I know I must steadfastly refuse to assume what healing is for my clients, taking care not to be overly invested in eradicating symptoms. I recognize that symptoms certainly communicate something about what’s going on with my clients, but often are not the root cause of what’s troubling them.

So I do my best to cultivate a more neutral approach, focusing my efforts on “being willing to be present with my clients exactly as they are, in the moment, with no desire for them to be any

different,” as Upledger Institute instructor Tim Hutton, PhD, LMP, CST-D, puts it. This aiming toward a neutral stance is one of the hallmarks of advanced craniosacral therapy (CST) practitioners.

While the goal of complete neutrality is not for every bodyworker in every situation, I believe we all could benefit from being more neutral in the ways we approach and interact with our clients. When we focus less on outcome and more on being present with our clients as they are, the outcomes they experience actually tend to improve. Cultivating neutrality encourages us to be aware of our choices and challenge our habitual reactions and assumptions.

Picture this: a longtime client comes in complaining of having had low-back pain since her last session. What’s your first thought? Do you blame yourself? Do you think, “*If she’d only do those stretches I demonstrated ...*”? Do you start strategizing the session before you even assess her? What happens in your body? Does your chest tighten, your breathing get shallow, or your heart beat faster? Do you lose track of sensation in your body? I’d consider all of these normal and typical human responses, and they’re all based on assumptions.

When we act from our assumptions, we lose one of the most important qualities of a successful bodyworker, the very thing that makes our skill

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and technique most useful: our nonjudgmental, supportive therapeutic presence. Therapeutic presence is the *how we are* with our clients, and it's just as important as the *what we do* with them. Developing skillful therapeutic presence involves working with our body awareness and body mechanics, as well as with our thoughts and biases.

BODY AWARENESS AND BODY MECHANICS

Our bodies are reliable gauges, but we have to pay attention to them. They tell us when we are tense or relaxed, when we feel safe, and when our boundaries are being crossed. They signal when we are in an unsupported position or have pushed past our physical limits. We access the feeling of neutrality through our bodies with our proprioceptive sense, and can further develop that sense with proper body mechanics.

Too often, however, therapists ignore the signals our bodies provide and work from places of tension or outright pain. When we do this often enough, we can become habituated to

NEUTRAL TOUCH

When we touch people, even in everyday situations, we have a natural tendency to either send energy in or take energy out. Sending energy in is most common, especially when we want to help. But when we mindlessly send energy in, it may not be what is needed; if so, no matter how good our intentions, it is uncomfortable for the person receiving our touch.

Working from a place of neutrality is ideal, because only then can we be sure we're acting in the best interests of our clients, open to whatever the person on the table needs in the present moment. In order to hold this place of neutrality, we must hold as little judgment as possible about the other person and ourselves—which is easier said than done! Still, striving for neutrality creates a discipline of catching that moment when we start to form ideas about what should be happening or predicting the outcome. The more awareness we can bring to monitoring our own biases, the easier it is to find a neutral place.

In bodywork, as in life, none of us like to be told what to do; and we are soon able to detect any agenda someone may have planned for us! People make the most progress when they follow the wisdom of their bodies, not the ideas of their therapist or helper. The bottom line is that when we are touched in a neutral way, we feel great, like somebody is *really* paying attention to us.

Working with the subtleties involved in finding a neutral place is a continuous and fascinating process.

Finding Neutral

The following is a fun and simple exercise for exploring and feeling into the concept of being neutral.

Sit opposite a friend with your knees close to each other, and place your hands on his or her knees. As you do so, have the intention of sending energy through your hands and into his or her body. Pay attention to what it feels like for you to be putting energy in and have your friend pay attention to what it feels like, as well. You only need to do this for a few minutes, and then gently take your hands away.

Take a moment for each of you to share your observations. What did this feel like? Was it comfortable? Intense? Warm? Use all of your senses to describe what you felt.

Now, place your hands back on your friend's knees, with the intention of taking energy out. Stay with that intention for a few minutes, and then take some time for observation and feedback once you take your hands off.

Finally, place your hands back on your friend's knees, but this time hold the intention of being neutral, neither putting energy in nor taking it out. While you're doing this, check in to see if it feels neutral to him or her as well. Stay here and play with the sensations to get the feeling of neutrality finely tuned. Once you have the feeling of neutrality reliably in your hands, change your intention so your hands are providing exactly what your friend needs at this moment.

Get feedback from your friend, and check in with yourself to be sure you're not just falling into a pattern of giving or taking, but responding appropriately to what the tissues are asking for. Stay grounded and present.

(Adapted from *From My Hands and Heart: Achieving Health and Balance with Craniosacral Therapy*, Kate Mackinnon, Hay House, 2013.)

our tension and numb to our bodies' signals, unaware that we are introducing our own tension patterns into our work.

Just as we gain information about our clients through our proprioceptive sense (e.g., we can feel fascial tension through our hands), our clients get information about us through theirs. Our tension, our emotional state, and our sense of safety and comfort (or lack of it) all show in our touch. Whether clients are consciously aware of picking up this information or not, their bodies register it and make decisions about how safe it is for them to relax and change. How can we help our clients create ease when our own bodies are tight, tense, or strained? It's vital that we pay attention to our own bodies as we work.

Physical effort is always involved in bodywork, and complete ease is something we may never attain. But we can work to be as easeful as possible in all we do. A good place to start is by grounding. Many people think of grounding as feeling their feet on the floor, or their sit bones on a chair, but it's more than that. It's gaining the sense of being "right here" in your body, feeling the whole of it as it moves in space, and being aware of what it's contacting. This allows you to make choices about how you move and the postures you maintain. As we often tell our clients—and would do well to apply to ourselves—when you're not aware of the tension you hold, you can't address it.

I hone my grounding skills with a dedicated practice of yoga and Continuum Movement, and a commitment to walking in nature daily (even when the weather's nasty). These help me be aware of my physical being and its limits, and help me feel connected to myself. While working, I actually keep most of my attention on my own body. I am continually feeling into my tissues, exploring how I can become more relaxed while staying alert and responsive.

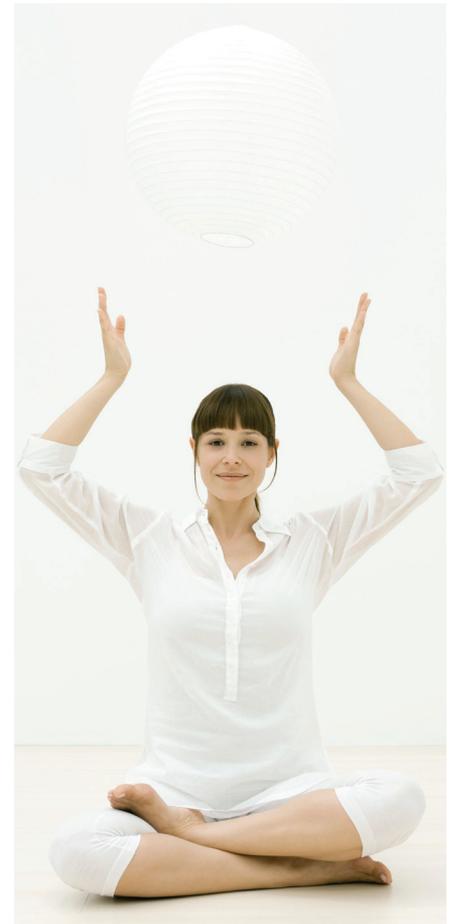
I know that once I'm aware of myself, I'm better equipped to be aware of my client. When I recognize the early signs of becoming tense or ungrounded, I can avoid overpowering my client or being so light with my contact that my client feels unmet.

ASSUMPTIONS AND REACTIONS

Michael, a computer animator, had experiences at each extreme before coming to see me. His primary complaints were neck and shoulder pain. He'd followed the recommendations of his company's ergonomics expert in setting up his workstation and exercised and stretched regularly. For years, he saw a practitioner who did deep myofascial work. She'd tell him, "Your back is so tight!" and then proceed to "pummel" him, as he put it. His muscles would be softer, but he'd be sore for days afterward, and he never got lasting relief. He then saw an energy worker who told him, "You just need to relax and receive." He reported falling asleep on her table several times, so he knew he did indeed relax, but he would wake up with the same symptoms he'd come in with.

When I worked with Michael, I used my hands to meet the tension in his body without attempting to overpower it. I simply matched the force that was at work in his tissues and relaxed as much as I could while continuing to meet that force. I didn't try to change it or him, but I did stay curious and alert. And, as I've come to expect with craniosacral therapy, his tissue started to move and soften. My hands were contacting his pectorals and rhomboids quite deeply, but with very little effort. He was surprised he could feel the pressure, but wasn't in pain.

Over the course of an hour, his shoulders softened, his right humerus rested more deeply in the fossa, and his neck lengthened. Over the following weeks, he reported that his exercises now helped him stay out of pain. It was



WANT MORE INFO?

Continuum Movement

Body awareness and movement system.
www.continuummovement.com

Healing From the Core

Present moment awareness.
www.healingfromthecore.com

Upledger Institute International

Craniosacral therapy training and information.
www.upledger.com

CST that I used to help him, but I truly believe his other therapists could have been effective with their modalities if they had come from a more neutral place, one in which they focused more on paying attention to his body's cues than on bolstering their assumptions.

When you're working, do you ever notice a guarding response in your clients? Have you considered, beyond just the amount of pressure you're applying, what else might cause that? In her book *Full Body Presence*, Suzanne Scurlock-Durana writes, "Most of us naturally do lean into whomever we are trying to help. But what feels safest to someone in need is a caregiver with full-body presence that is wide, diffuse, and not highly focused on them." Scurlock-Durana pioneered the Healing from the Core curriculum to help therapists develop their own inner resources and support their therapeutic presence. What might happen in your own practice if you tried to relax into what you are doing and became more aware of yourself?

THOUGHTS AND BIASES

It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work and that when we no longer know which way to go we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings. —Wendell Berry

Physical neutrality allows us to meet our clients' bodies with contact that is comfortable and effective. It's equally important to work toward a neutral approach in our thoughts and opinions. Recall my client Michael: his therapists' comments revealed their opinions, which were then translated into less-than-neutral—and less-than-helpful—bodywork.

Knowing our innate biases can keep us from mindlessly reacting to our own thoughts. When we focus on our idea of a good outcome, we



may miss something important. It's also good to remember that by focusing on alleviating symptoms, we align ourselves solely with the part of the client that wants to change, and distance ourselves from any part that doesn't.

Another client of mine, Angelica, assists child welfare workers with their most difficult cases. The nature of her work is emotionally draining, and her travel schedule is physically demanding. She came to me complaining of frequent, debilitating migraines.

As I made contact with the tight band of tissue at the base of her skull, she spoke about how much the headaches limited her, keeping her at home in a quiet room for days at a time. I was very conscious of a pull in me to want to eradicate her headaches, and an impulse to tighten my hold to try to soften the muscles there. I chose not to align with that. Instead, I kept my contact steady and asked her, "So, what about these headaches?"

As I sat with her, meeting the tension in her tissues, she found an answer that surprised us both: the headaches kept her from working beyond her capacity. She was so dedicated to her work that if the headaches didn't make her take time off, she might never rest. As she spoke, her fascia began to lengthen, and I followed that movement.

Recognizing the protective nature of her migraines allowed Angelica to

prioritize self-care. She scheduled rest periods in her week, and her headaches began to subside. Over several sessions, the tightness in her tissues resolved. She hasn't had a migraine in nearly a year.

When we think we know all about an issue, and how it should be resolved, we may close ourselves off to information that doesn't fit our assumptions. Mary Ellen Clark's story illustrates this. An Olympic diver, she developed vertigo that threatened her career. She saw an array of specialists, all of whom focused on her inner ear, assuming the cause was there. Then she came to see John Upledger, DO, OMM, the developer of CST, who found a slight fascial pull in her right knee and ankle from an old injury. It was putting enough torque on her system to affect her sense of balance. He helped her release that tension, and she went on to take her second bronze medal in diving.

CULTIVATING NEUTRALITY

Our clients come to us with goals: they want to stop hurting, move more easily, have a better quality of life. We can want that for them, too, but when we decide how that's going to happen, we've prioritized our own opinions and done them a disservice.

Cultivating a more neutral approach means aiming to introduce as little of your own bias as possible, keeping the focus on your clients and their process of healing. The results your clients experience will speak for themselves. **m&b**

C Robyn Scherr is diplomate-certified in craniosacral therapy, the highest level of certification in that field. A frequent teaching assistant for all levels of the Upledger Institute curriculum, she's also the editor of *From My Hands and Heart* (Kate Mackinnon, Hay House, 2013). Find out more at www.livinginthebody.net.