



A GUIDE TO LIVING WELL

## The Fascinating Practice Of Craniosacral Therapy – Can It Help Us Heal?



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THE PATH to healing is sometimes revealed by simply allowing the body to do what it's supposed to. Craniosacral therapy is an ancient modality that supports the body's innate ability to heal itself. Its power is in its gentleness and ability to elevate our overall well-being, which makes it an incredible resource for sustainable, mind-body balance.

We recently dropped in for a session with LA-based integrative physical therapist, **Jenny Wirt**, who incorporates craniosacral therapy into her bodywork practice to help remove physical *and* **emotional blocks**. We were amazed by how profoundly light yet grounded – and completely pain-free – we felt after just one session. We asked Jenny to tell us more about the magical modality of craniosacral therapy and why this not-so-hyped practice is worth a try...

## What is craniosacral therapy?

Craniosacral therapy is a gentle, hands-on technique that enhances the body's self-healing abilities. Operating as its own physiological system, the craniosacral (CS) system is essentially the ebb and flow of the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) that surrounds the brain and spinal cord as it's produced and reabsorbed in a semi-closed hydraulic system. This creates a subtle rhythmic expansion and contraction of the body as it pulses, called craniosacral motion.

As we go through life, beginning with birth, our bodies store “traumas” as restrictions in the **fascia**, dural membranes and other tissues. This limits its movement and therefore restricts skeletal movement in response to the flow. These stored traumas can be the result of repetitive use, emotional experiences, injury or even normal daily stressors of life. Craniosacral therapy (CST) facilitates the letting go of these held traumas in order to restore normal rhythm. Although it's comprised of the **central nervous system** from skull to sacrum, it can be palpated and therefore treated at any joint.

## Where did the practice originate from?

Dr. John Upledger first discovered the CranioSacral pulse in 1971 while assisting a neurosurgeon in a spinal surgery on a dural membrane (which houses the CSF). It was moving rhythmically, making it difficult to perform the procedure. This discovery catalyzed the transition of his practice toward cranial osteopathy at the Dept. of Biomechanics at Michigan State College of Osteopathic Medicine. Upledger noted that the skull was not fused together as previously thought, but instead in constant subtle motion at the sutures where the bones of the skull meet. He developed the techniques to remove the tissue restrictions that serve as blocks to optimal craniosacral motion and system function.

# How does craniosacral therapy work?

A typical treatment begins with my client lying down. First, I feel the rhythm at various points in the body to assess the rate, amplitude, symmetry and quality of the pulse for any abnormalities. This directs me to where in the body tension is being held. I then work with the body to facilitate the letting go of layers of physical or emotional restrictions in the fascia and other tissues. This is an allowing technique rather than a forcing. The held trauma begins to release from the tissues through my specific hand placement, intention and direction of energy. Once the block of tension is removed, it allows the affected structures to slowly start to move into more optimal alignment. It's always the body letting go, and I follow as it softly unwinds. Because the fascia is one continuous piece of connective tissue from head to toe, addressing limitations in one area can free up movement in another.

## What does craniosacral therapy feel like?

Often there's heat or vibration as the tissues release and unwind. Clients are frequently amazed that it's their own body creating the heat or movement — not my hands. Because the fascia is continuous, you may experience sensation (or release) in a different area of the body that is being directly treated. It's a very relaxing experience which resets your nervous system and will continue to process over the course of a few days — all allowing the body to self-correct. Everyone's experience afterwards is unique, but often an increase in water intake, rest and/or emotional release techniques are needed to aid in processing and healing.

## What conditions does craniosacral therapy address?

It is especially beneficial in treating headaches, musculoskeletal injury, neck/back/pelvic pain, joint inflammation and lack of range of motion, as well as asthma and other disease processes. However, I truly believe anyone can benefit because we all use our bodies daily and thus build up emotional tension. I've yet to find a person with a body (experiencing symptoms or not) without imbalances or restrictions. Often they are unaware, and typically don't become aware, until it's expressed as physical discomfort or disease.

# What role does craniosacral therapy play in physical therapy?

I blend physical therapy-based assessment of alignment and muscle function with gentle release and manipulation techniques via craniosacral therapy and other healing modalities. The techniques I use all tap into the central nervous system to allow the body to let go of any restrictions it's holding onto, instead of aggressively forcing movement or manipulation. Over a series of sessions, the body will naturally realign and return to balance.

## What are the emotional or energetic benefits?

We can hold emotions in our tissues and CST provides a **physical release** of those emotions. It also has mood-boosting effects via decreased stress and improved brain function. Alignment of the spine can play a role in both the flow and energy of CSF. Imagine a curved spine or pelvis that is rotated — how would it create a kink in flow as it navigates from the top of the spine through the bottom?

## How do we know it actually works? Is there any research?

As a relatively new treatment technique and one that works through the subtle body, admittedly there's minimal research. But studies do suggest it is helpful in treating a variety of disorders including asthma, fibromyalgia, dementia, migraines and neck pain. Through my personal clinical experience, however, I have not encountered a more impactful and powerful treatment. It has completely changed my practice and allowed my clients to achieve better outcomes in a shorter amount of time. I can feel the softening of tissues around a stiff and inflamed joint, or a shift in alignment, in a way that I could not have previously. I've been told I have "magic hands" and had clients achieve nearly full range of motion in one session following a total knee replacement. I've also calmed asthma-related symptoms and relieved migraine headaches for clients. Because it's allowing the body to let go of the restrictions, instead of increased pressure and force, my clients often prefer these techniques.

# What should I expect from an integrative PT session with craniosacral therapy?

All sessions begin with an assessment of posture and alignment, craniosacral rhythm and neuromuscular activation. I typically focus on the core and pelvis to start, as everything stems from there, while also addressing a specific areas (as needed). I use gentle, light touch to allow structures to come into alignment — releasing muscle tension, scar tissue and acupuncture meridians. Although gentle and relaxing, the techniques do facilitate a release deep into the tissues. I provide supportive scents, sounds, emotional release techniques and colors (to incorporate for chakra balancing) to further support healing. I also aim to empower my clients with exercises to perform at home to help maintain the realignment, allowing muscles to function properly and prevent injury.

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