

What Is Craniosacral Therapy?

This subtle treatment bridges the gap between massage and energy medicine.

BY COURTNEY HELGOE



IF A MESSAGE practitioner has ever gently cradled your head in their hands, pressing lightly at the back of your skull, you may have unknowingly experienced craniosacral therapy. CST practitioners use gentle pressure and subtle adjustments at the top of the spinal column and at the sacrum to address specific health conditions, such as migraine, sinus issues, and concussions, as well as more general disorders, like chronic pain and anxiety.

Why the emphasis on the cranium and sacrum? They offer direct access to the central nervous system.

"The CNS is right there," explains Janet Crow, MS, CMT, CST-T, a practitioner based in St. Paul, Minn. "And the vagus nerve. When you're softening those tissues, you activate the parasympathetic system, and then your body can self-heal and self-correct."

THE BACKSTORY

Craniosacral therapy was developed in the late 1970s by John Upledger, DO, an osteopathic physician and clinical researcher at Michigan State University. Osteopathy focuses on the many ways in which the spine, joints, and muscles influence overall health; its treatments use noninvasive manual therapies to help stimulate the body's own healing mechanisms.

CST aims to remove tension, increase the subtle mobility in the small bones of the cranium and sacrum, and promote the flow of cerebrospinal fluid. The attention to this flow is somewhat similar to acupuncture, which focuses on the flow of vital energy, or qi. Cerebrospinal

fluid supplies nutrients to nervous-system tissue and removes waste products from the brain.

During a treatment, the practitioner places their hands on the head and at points along the spine, but the therapeutic target of CST is the body's network of connective tissue. This includes the dura, which surrounds the brain, and the fascia, which stretches throughout the body.

The goal is to release restrictions, or "adhesions," in the network caused by injury, illness, or tension, which can trigger a range of health problems. For example, immobility in the connective tissue around the brain might express itself as a headache, or it might feel like anxiety and foggy thinking.

"One technical way CST looks at fascia is that it can have an effect on the nervous system," Crow explains. "Tension in the fascia can pull on the dura and affect the central nervous system that way. It's all one system."

THE ROLE OF ENERGY

CST is a biomechanical treatment, but it also involves energy healing. Crow describes energy as the bridge between the mind and the body.

One example of how that can work is when the body sustains an impact, such as from a blow or a fall. The force of the impact enters the body, and if that force doesn't have a way to exit, what remains forms an "energy cyst."

"Say you're rushing to work, and you step off the curb and fall, hurting your knee," Crow explains. "You're late, so you can't rest and shake it off. Instead, you run off to your meeting."

When we do this, she says, the force of the impact remains and can lead to persistent pain. It's not necessarily the blow that causes it; it's the lack of recovery time. "Energy gets stuck when we don't take time to release it," says Crow.

CST looks at the body through the lens of its connective tissue, which explains why a knee injury can cause pain beyond the knee. Similarly, a concussion might disrupt digestion, balance, and concentration. The force of the impact and the restrictions it can create reverberate throughout the body's connective networks.

Releasing restrictions in the connective tissue enables the release of stuck energy, allowing the body to heal itself. Crow says this is our "inner physician" at work.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Because it promotes nervous-system regulation, CST can benefit pretty much anyone. (People with a recent brain injury or any kind of circulation issue should get a physician's clearance before trying CST.)

My own session with Crow was deeply relaxing, though I felt the most dramatic effects during the hours and days afterward, when I was intensely thirsty and sleepy. Crow later explained these were signs of how my body kept healing itself after I left her office.

"The techniques that happen on the table are the first step," she adds. "The real healing comes afterward."

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