

Craniosacral Therapy Helps Chronic Pain

Can a gentle scalp massage really cure illnesses and injuries as diverse as carpal tunnel syndrome and Bell's palsy -- not to mention healing long-ago trauma and emotional distress? As a matter of fact, it can -- if you put yourself in the hands of a trained and skilled craniosacral therapist. Of the many alternative therapies, craniosacral therapy (CST) is surely one of the most unusual. CST is a variation of osteopathic and chiropractic medicine, where a therapist gently places his/her hands atop your skull and feels for the oscillation frequency -- the small degree of movement that the skull bones naturally retain throughout life. This is a subtle motion of the membrane encasing the cerebrospinal fluid in the brain and spinal cord down to the sacrum, the bone at the bottom of the spine. The therapist gently manipulates the bones to bring them back into proper alignment. It feels like a very gentle massage, but CST is a potent healing therapy for a wide variety of disorders, including chronic pain, headaches, carpal tunnel syndrome, fibromyalgia, learning disabilities, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, vertigo, whiplash injury, TMJ, herniated disc pain and musculoskeletal problems. While surprising and somewhat inexplicable, even many skeptics acknowledge that "sometimes it just works."

HOW CST WORKS

CST is based on research from the early part of the last century by osteopathic doctor William Gamer Sutherland, DO. His work centered on the theory that the skull bones have a rhythm that he called the "breath of life" and others call "the vital force." The theory now associated with CST, besides one of treating illness, is that physical or emotional trauma, even from birth, can cause a disturbance in this oscillation that can last for years.

Cerebrospinal fluid affects nerves that control all tissues in the body, so any disruption can contribute to a wide range of problems. It's believed that restoring its natural flow enables the body to begin healing itself. Here in the US, thousands of osteopathic doctors, naturopathic doctors, chiropractors and massage therapists are also CST practitioners. But you probably won't be surprised to learn that the medical world considers CST just this side of loony. Skeptics say its very basis is impossible because the skull bones fuse completely in childhood. CST practitioners respond that this is not so - the skull bones have motion throughout life. They say that even the elderly continue to respond well to CST.

To find out more about this curious and increasingly popular therapy, I called Thomas A. Kruzel, ND, who practices CST at the Rockwood Natural Medicine Clinic in Scottsdale, Arizona. He is the former vice president of clinical affairs and chief medical officer at the Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine in Phoenix. Dr. Kruzel likens the concept of opening up cerebrospinal fluid flow to the underlying principles of chiropractic in which "communication channels" are realigned throughout the body. CST does not itself heal problems -- it releases inertia and congestion, thereby returning homeostasis and enhancing the body's ability to heal and regulate itself.

Dr. Kruzel says the hardest part of his CST training was learning to discern the motion in the skull, which he describes as something like an undulation. When a patient comes to see him, he places his hands on his/her head to get an exact sense of this person's motion. This gives him information he uses in clearing restrictions in the pumping of the fluid through the brain, into the spinal column and the emanating nerve roots. Sometimes he may also gently manipulate the lower part of the spine in an osteopathic fashion to restore tandem movement in the sacrum and the spine.

WHAT WILL YOU FEEL?

Patients don't always feel the change as it is occurring, he says, but they often experience a kind of gastrointestinal release such as a gurgling in the bowels when the fluid is freed up. Constipated patients frequently find that their bowels begin moving again after a treatment. Dr. Kruzel says in older people CST helps reduce risk of stroke and of falling, and that for children it helps with ADD as well as learning disabilities and even possibly autism. Virtually all patients, adults and children alike, find the treatment to be extremely relaxing, he says.

Dr. Kruzel often uses CST to treat Bell's palsy. He says he can correct it very quickly if the patient comes in right after onset. He has used it for hypertension - he says it brings some patients' pressure back to normal. Some parents of newborns bring their baby for a treatment after the emotional and physical rigors of birth. Another frequent reason people come to him is after an athletic or other injury. One patient had been severely injured in a car accident the previous year. She had many broken bones and went through a year of physical rehab, but even after her physical injuries had healed she struggled with depression. When she came to Dr. Kruzel, he found that she had almost no cranial motion because the flow of the fluid had been truncated when her pelvis broke. He treated her regularly for a time and today she is doing very well physically and mentally.

Patients remain fully clothed for CST treatment. Sessions usually last 30 minutes to one hour. Patients may come only one or two times, or several times a week for a number of months. Elderly patients tend to check in for a session once every few months, says Dr. Kruzel. Costs vary by area of the country and many insurance plans cover the cost when treatment is from an osteopathic or naturopathic doctor.

The technique may seem simplistic, even magical - but craniosacral therapy is actually a precise skill a good therapist has trained long and hard to learn. Another resource is the Craniosacral Therapy Association of North America, which provides CST standards. Since quality may vary widely in the absence of national standards, it's helpful to get a recommendation from someone you trust who has personal experience with a particular therapist.

Source(s):

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