

Applying CranioSacral Therapy in the BioAquatic Environment

Nearly 30 years ago, osteopathic physician and surgeon John E. Upledger developed a set of gentle techniques designed to release restrictions around the brain and spinal cord, and free the central nervous system to perform at peak efficiency. This hands-on approach, called CranioSacral Therapy, was devised after years of research and testing at Michigan State University.

Few structures in the human body have as much influence over its ability to function properly as the brain and spinal cord that comprise the central nervous system. In turn, few systems have as much impact on the central nervous system as the craniosacral system — the membranes and fluid that surround, protect and nourish the brain and spinal cord.

Every day the body endures stresses and strains for which its structures compensate.

Unfortunately, these changes often cause fascia to tighten and distort components of the craniosacral system, which can then cause tension to form around the brain and spinal cord, and impact cerebrospinal fluid flow. The result is a barrier to the healthy performance of the central nervous system — and potentially every other system with which it interacts.

Tapping Into the Self-Corrective Mechanism

CranioSacral Therapy focuses on normalizing the craniosacral system, which extends from the

skull, face and mouth down to the sacrum and coccyx. This environment consists of a compartment formed by the dura mater membrane, the cerebrospinal fluid contained within the membranes, the systems regulating fluid flow, the bones that attach to the membranes, and the joints and sutures interconnecting these bones.

At Michigan State University from 1975 to 1983, Dr. John E. Upledger led a multidisciplinary team of anatomists, physiologists, biophysicists and bioengineers to test and document the influence of the craniosacral system on the body. Together they conducted research — much of it published — that formed the basis for the modality Dr. Upledger went on to develop and name CranioSacral Therapy.

Among other things, they discovered that in its most basic sense, the craniosacral system functions as a semi-closed hydraulic system bathing the brain and spinal cord and their component cells in cerebrospinal fluid pumped rhythmically at a rate of 6-12 cycles per minute. As cerebrospinal fluid volume and pressure rises and falls within the craniosacral system, corresponding changes occur in dura mater membrane tensions. These changes in turn induce accommodative movements in the bones that attach to the dura mater compartment.

When the natural mobility of the dura mater or any of its attached bones is impaired, the function of the craniosacral system — and the central nervous system — may be impaired as well. Fortunately, such tissue restrictions can be detected and corrected using simple methods of palpation.

A restriction refers to fascia that lacks its usual glide and elasticity. Dura mater restrictions can be caused by a number of factors, including physical trauma, inflammation, disease processes, chemical imbalances or neurological impairment. Such restrictions can occur either directly or indirectly, as these same factors and processes can limit the mobility of fascia that is external yet still connected to structures of the craniosacral system.

Generally, using about 5 grams of pressure — roughly the weight of a nickel — the CranioSacral Therapy practitioner uses his or her hands to evaluate the system by gently palpating various locations on the body to test for ease of motion and rhythm of the cerebrospinal fluid pulsing within the membranes. Specific manual techniques are then used to release restrictions in fasciae, membranes, and any other tissues influencing the craniosacral system.

By facilitating and enhancing the body's self-corrective mechanisms and normalizing the mobility of the craniosacral system (the environment of the central nervous system), CranioSacral Therapy has proven useful for a wide variety of dysfunctions, from chronic pain and sports injuries to stroke and neurological impairment.

How the Water Enhances Effectiveness

For decades, CranioSacral Therapy practitioners have worked in traditional healthcare environments, with patients or clients lying supine, fully clothed on a massage table. Over the past few years, a new generation of CranioSacral Therapy practitioners have begun working in an environment some say is optimal to whole-body healing: ocean water.

“The relative weightlessness and gentle rocking of the ocean lets you tap into an environment that can boost the effects of CranioSacral Therapy,” says Roy Desjarlais, LMT, CST-D. Roy is a staff therapist at The Upledger Institute, a health resource center dedicated to the advancement of CranioSacral Therapy and other noninvasive modalities. “When the nervous system moves into a relaxed state,” he says, “tensions release, muscles lengthen, joint range of motion increases, and internal healing processes work more effectively. The water simply helps buoy the body into that state more easily.”

“Everything we do in the treatment room is multiplied when working in the water,” says Sheryl McGavin, MBA, OTR/L, another Upledger Institute staff therapist. “Unlike a solid treatment table, the water offers unlimited planes of movement, and the tissues and viscera respond in a whole different way when you don’t have gravity to deal with. For clients who have hit a plateau in their process, or have particular body issues hampered by the confines of the massage table, the water adds that extra element that can gently urge them to their next stage of healing,”

Sheryl says she was first attracted to this aspect of therapy when working with Bob*, a client who had fallen 40 feet off the stack of a tugboat onto the deck below. He had multiple cranial fractures, a ruptured kidney that was later removed, and numerous extensive injuries. “If that wasn’t enough,” she adds, “he had been in coma for quite awhile.”

With Bob, Sheryl found the treatment table simply wouldn’t allow for the movements that his body seemed to want to make in an effort to release his tissue restrictions. In the water,

however, all that changed. When his body had the freedom to move wherever it wanted, the results started coming much more quickly.

“Bob had a lot of back and neck pain and stiffness that severely affected his gait and sleep patterns,” Sheryl reports. “This area improved tremendously for him, making walking much more effortless.” Secondary to his original injuries, Bob had also lost most of his vision and was considered legally blind. “Surprisingly, his eyes started to track together after each water session. Now we’re seeing great improvements in his vision. That was something none of us expected.”

A Typical Aquatic CranioSacral Session

While CranioSacral Therapy is typically practiced in salt water because of the buoyancy and the soothing benefits of the natural environment, any body of water, as long as the temperature is warm enough and comfortable for the client, can work well. “We also like to have at least two therapists with each client at a water depth about waist or chest high,” Sheryl says, though she often works with as many as five therapists at one time.

There’s no special equipment needed unless a therapist is working alone with a client. In that case a flotation device like a noodle can help with support and body positioning. Clients sometimes use goggles, nose plugs or ear plugs for comfort since water occasionally gets in their faces. It’s also sometimes helpful to use water shoes and a lightweight wet suit for warmth.

Initially, with therapist support, the client floats on his back as if lying on a treatment table.

Then the therapists begin assessing the body using palpation, just as they do in a clinical setting. “We gently palpate the body to assess the craniosacral rhythm — the rhythm of cerebrospinal fluid as it flows through the craniosacral system,” Sheryl says. “As CranioSacral practitioners, we’re trained to interpret the symmetry, quality, amplitude and rate of that pulse to determine where there might be tissue restrictions in any area of the body that are preventing the free and natural flow of cerebrospinal fluid within the craniosacral system.”

Once they evaluate the craniosacral system at various points of the body, the therapists determine where they’ll be placing their hands and working with the client. They generally position themselves at two different locations on the body, which are connected internally via the multidimensional fascial system that runs like a continual weave throughout the body, as well as via other internal structures. Then with their hands they gently palpate the tissues to evaluate the fluid movement — or the lack of movement — that’s occurring in the body.

Again, CranioSacral Therapy practitioners work with the body as a self-corrective mechanism. Within this philosophy, they believe that when given the right opportunity, the body has an innate intelligence to correct itself in a vast majority of circumstances. “We simply facilitate that process,” Sheryl says. “That’s why we work so lightly. We try to feel what the tissues are attempting to do, and then we support that with our hands. We follow rather than direct the movement, which is very different from most therapeutic modalities. It’s a process that both honors the client and the therapist.”

Dural Tube Release

One of the primary techniques used in a CranioSacral session is the dural tube release. After assessing the client's body for restrictions, one therapist stands at the head of the client and allows the occiput to rest in the palms of the hands. Another therapist stands at the client's sacrum, allowing it to gently rest in the hands. Then very, very gently — using no more than 5 grams of pressure — they palpate the body to assess the dural tube as it moves in whatever way it seems to want.

“In the water the body can move freely at any plane,” Sheryl says. “So the sacrum can turn or twist or rock in whatever way it needs to allow the dural tube to release restrictions. The therapists simply follow and assist the motion of the body until it stops and they feel signs of release.”

Diaphragm Releases

Diaphragm releases are performed in much the same way as the dural tube release. “In CranioSacral Therapy, we focus a lot on diaphragms because the fascia is more horizontally oriented there, so there tends to be a lot of restrictions,” Sheryl says. To release them, therapists place the palms of their hands on either side of a diaphragm and palpate it to feel the patterns of tension in the soft tissues. Then they just follow the lines of tension and assist the body as it moves and releases the tissue restrictions.

“Because the whole body is now free to follow the movement of the tissues, it's also free to engage and release the tissues more fully and with greater ease,” Sheryl says. “Ultimately, this makes it a much easier process on both practitioner and patient.”

Detecting the Release

How do you know when there's been a tissue release? "You may feel a subtle lengthening of the dural tube, or a softening of the tissues under your hands," Sheryl says. "The client may describe a sense of ease or loosening, or he might let out a long sigh. You may detect a release in the therapeutic pulse — a pulsing in your hands that gradually increases and dissipates as the tissues change. The tissues may feel more fluid and elastic, and the tissue motion may feel enhanced or somehow 'easier' than it did before. And then there are those times when everything just stops and you simply feel done."

"Remember," Sheryl says, "if you're used to manually manipulating tissues, CranioSacral Therapy is going to feel more like thought than action. It's that subtle. Just intend the correction, listen to the body and follow it. That's enough."

How to Learn CranioSacral Therapy

CranioSacral Therapy is taught internationally through The Upledger Institute, Inc.[®] (UI).

Founded in 1985 by John E. Upledger, D.O., O.M.M., the developer of CranioSacral Therapy, UI has trained more than 65,000 practitioners in 56 different countries. Today it conducts hundreds of workshops each year educating healthcare professionals of diverse disciplines.

In addition to its core curriculum, UI offers five levels of BioAquatic Explorations, from

introductory workshops to those designed for the advanced CranioSacral Therapy practitioners. Each one uses concepts in CranioSacral Therapy, therapeutic subtle energy techniques, and the physiological and psychological benefits of the ocean as a medium for healing and personal growth.

To learn more, call The Upledger Institute's Educational Services Dept. toll-free at 1-800-233-5880 and ask for priority code R0103A. You're also welcome to visit www.upledger.com.

#

* Name changed to protect confidentiality.

SIDEBAR

The Upledger Institute offers a 10-Step Protocol for BioAquatic Explorations. Its goal? To enhance awareness of CranioSacral Therapy by teaching therapists how to develop a holistic, cooperative relationship with the ocean and its healing resources.

1. Intention: Establishing openness, acceptance and trust of the healing and guiding aspects of nature. Working cooperatively with the inner physician/body wisdom and the inherent intelligence and healing ability of the ocean and its life forms. Joyfully embracing the ocean as an active presence in the cooperative healing process.
2. Melding: With the client, the multi-therapist team, the ocean and the surrounding environment.
3. Intentional Melding With the Craniosacral System: Palpating/sensing the craniosacral system in relation to the ocean with its bioaquatic dynamics — its waves, currents, tides,

- life, intelligence, chemistry, gravity-free support, electromagnetic qualities.
4. Whole Body Evaluation: Exploring, integrating and applying CranioSacral Therapy techniques within the bioaquatic environment.
 5. Direction of Energy: Utilizing the ocean's vitality, energy and intelligence with the introduction of scalar waves.
 6. Fascial Glide/Mobilization: Working with diaphragm releases, OA and L5-S1 decompression.
 7. Dural Tube Techniques: Assessing and treating to include rock/glide, facilitated segments, and regional tissue release of the dural tube.
 8. Intracranial Membrane System: Focusing on osseous and membranous restrictions within the cranium, hard palate and mandible.
 9. Whole-Body Tissue Release: To effect global results.
 10. Integration: Specific to the individual and his or her experience of this exploration, including acceptance of being related to the universal healing process.

Educational Resources

An Introduction to CranioSacral Therapy: Anatomy, Function, and Treatment by Don Cohen. North Atlantic Books (1996).

CranioSacral Therapy: Touchstone for Natural Healing by John E. Upledger, D.O., O.M.M. North Atlantic Books and UI Enterprises (2001).

SomatoEmotional Release: Deciphering the Language of Life by John E. Upledger, D.O., O.M.M. North Atlantic Books and UI Enterprises (2002).

#

Comments from reviewers:

Article is well written! Healing is also dependent upon the relationship of the client/practitioner- in a sense, the client's willingness to allow it to work. It's energy medicine, really. And, I think mentioning the still point is where the healing takes place is important. Donna Lewen

I have practiced CST for many years now. I was trained by John Barnes, PT, founder of MFR Seminars (Myofascial Release Seminars). He worked very closely in conjunction with John Uplegger until they had a fundamental and permanent branching of their techniques. CST is the corner stone for listening to the body's state, the rhythm within that dictates all impulses on the electrical, emotional and sensory levels. A CST practitioner can find the aquatic environment to be an amplifier to feeling the craniosacral pulse. It is a bit different at first practicing CST in the water as you have to get used to the new positions, the watery sensation combined with stillness. Personally, I find I can sense, follow and nurture the unwinding in a different and profound way in all planes of movement with the added benefits of submersion.

The article is well written and correct. It should clarify the dural bony attachments as it comes across that it may attach to the vertebrae of spine. It does link the skull and the sacrum. Note: advanced Watsu practitioners use craniosacral rhythm techniques to begin a session and then throughout in moments of stillness. Julia Meno