CranioSacral Therapy

The Lightest of Touch

by Jill K. Mabry

As massage therapists, we all have had a stressed-out client dash into the office and take half the session to relax. However, if at the start of the session you induce a "still point" in the client anywhere on his body, you can release accumulated stress within the first couple of minutes.

"A still point is an extended pause or interruption in the rhythmical activity of the craniosacral system that triggers a momentary buildup of cerebrospinal fluid," wrote Lisa Upledger, D.C., C.S.T.-D., in her article, "CranioSacral Therapy: Working with the Body's Self-Correcting Mechanisms" (MASSAGE Magazine, March 2007). "When the fluid is released, it causes the membranes to stretch a bit more and 'flush' any inherent restrictions or adhesions from the system."

"A still point can occur spontaneously or be induced by the therapist using delicate tissue techniques to restrict the flow of cerebrospinal fluid through the craniosacral system until it stops completely," she added.
Get still

Craniosacral Therapy (CST) was developed by osteopathic physician John E. Upledger, who now heads up The Upledger Institute in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. CST is a gentle method of evaluating and enhancing the body's craniosacral system, which comprises the membranes and cerebrospinal fluid that surround and protect the brain and spinal cord.

Using a soft touch—generally no greater than 5 grams, or about the weight of a nickel—CST practitioners release restrictions in the craniosacral system to improve the functioning of the central nervous system.

Effecting a still point is an important component of CST, and it has a profound relaxing effect on the autonomic nervous system; thus, it is beneficial with most hyper autonomic problems. Effecting a still point improves fluid exchange between the various physiological compartments of the body, and it improves blood flow by reducing sympathetic nervous tone. In a short time, the client becomes notably calmer and able to maximize the benefits of his massage. A still point also is a nice way to end a massage session, as it balances the client's craniosacral system for a smoother transition back into his day.

For the past 12 years, I have been a CST study-group leader for massage therapists. Study group participants probably still hear the sound of my voice from the myriad times I have said, “Still point. Still point. Still point. ... This will be your most useful tool.” Therapists would ask, “What if a client has a headache?” “Still point,” I would answer. “What if a client comes in with edema?” Still point. “What if a client is tired all of the time?” Still point. “How about the client with rheumatoid arthritis?” Still point. Tight muscles? Still point. Acute pain? Still point. Fever? Still point. Reducing stress? Still point. And the list goes on.

We are one

Do you ever have clients come in with reoccurring problems? They are happy when you address the area of their pain and they feel better after a visit. But time after time, they point to the same area where the pain has returned—and we continue to chase restrictions and pain. The core of the problem may not always be at the sight of the pain. In this case, it is helpful to have the skill of palpating the craniosacral rhythm throughout the body to determine where the body fascia is restricted.

The fascia—the tough, total body, interconnected tissue that has been called the body stocking under the skin—helps hold all of our parts together. This means abnormal tension patterns in the fascia may be transmitted from one body part to another in what may appear to be a bizarre way, unless one appreciates the oneness of the fascial system.

Among the more subtle physiological body movements fascia normally allows is the rhythmically internal and external rotation of the total body in concert with the craniosacral system. With proprioceptive hands, the core restrictions that are causing the illusive, recurrent symptoms are revealed, making the craniosacral motion a great evaluation tool.

For example, I recently had a client with hip pain. Using CST to evaluate the fascia, the restrictions lead me to an old appendectomy scar. Over time, the fascia pull from the scar caused pain and discomfort in the hip area. I addressed the core restriction and the client expressed relief from the pain.

Other conditions I've used CST for include reoccurring headaches caused by fascia pulls in a lower extremity, low-back pain caused by a hysterectomy and temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorder derived from a fascia pull originating with an old knee injury.

Follow your passion

I started my journey in The Upledger Institute's CST curriculum in 1994, while still in massage school. At the time, I did not realize how easy it would be to incorporate CST into a massage session—or how useful learning multiple modalities would be for my future CST practice. Over the years, I have come to notice that with each continuing education workshop, I became a better...
therapist for the client.

Massage therapists occasionally ask me how they can build a successful practice. We can do this by following our passion for bodywork and pursuing modalities that interest us. When we do what we love most, it isn’t work.

Years of building my practice and expanding my client care to obstetrics, infertility and chronic-fatigue patients—from newborns to the elderly—has been a surprising and rewarding journey.

A CST pediatric class allowed me to acquire skills to work with children, and it unexpectedly made me a better therapist for clients of all ages. Attuning to the sensitivity of children showed my hands how to be more perceptive with adults.

The biggest surprise occurred in February 2009 when I assisted at The Upledger Institute’s new CST obstetric course. This one class has changed how I address all clients—female and male—who come into my office. I know I can offer simple techniques to release the uterus in women and the prostate in men. Thus, by increasing my capabilities, I have been able to build a large, diverse client base.

Massage therapists working in a chiropractic setting also find CST a beneficial modality for the type of client injuries often presented to them. Acute injuries, such as whiplash or a “hot low back,” usually have to wait awhile until the client can receive massage therapy. But with the “direction of energy” technique, the client can be seen by the massage therapist as early as the first visit. This low-force, noninvasive technique has no contraindications. Stimulating the body’s natural healing mechanisms as soon as possible increases the rate at which the client experiences improvement.

Another valuable CST technique in the chiropractic setting is the “dural tube rock and glide.” This technique is helpful for herniated disc, postoperative adhesions, compressed or fractured vertebra, scoliosis, lordosis, kyphosis and fusions. Using CST to find the core of reoccurring issues and being able to work on acute injuries, such as whiplash or a “hot low back,” usually have to wait awhile until the client can receive massage therapy. But with the “direction of energy” technique, the client can be seen by the massage therapist as early as the first visit. This low-force, noninvasive technique has no contraindications. Stimulating the body’s natural healing mechanisms as soon as possible increases the rate at which the client experiences improvement.

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conditions are two valuable tools for any massage therapist.

**When the client wonders**

In a typical session, I might use three to five different modalities. First, I evaluate restrictions with the techniques of CST and visceral manipulation. I then use CST, lymph drainage therapy, visceral manipulation, Swedish massage, positional and trigger-point release or acupressure. I never feel the need to explain each modality as I change from one to another. But, very often, when I introduce a CST technique, clients enthusiastically will inquire what it was they just experienced. How do you explain CST to a client when incorporating it into a session?

"It is with the lightest of touch that the body can do the deepest healing," I explain. "Through this light touch, the body knows how to self-correct. You were probably able to perceive the deep relaxation throughout your entire body." I always keep the explanation simple and let the client experience the results.

In these times of rising stress in our clients' lives, receiving regular massage can be more beneficial than ever. Adding CST to a session builds the immune system by strengthening the thymus. Clients also find it helpful to learn about the use of a still-point inducer, a self-care tool, to strengthen their craniosacral system between appointments.

However, one of the most important things I learned from a friend when I started this journey was to also receive bodywork. The circulatory system offers us a lesson: After the lungs oxygenate the blood, the heart pumps the first, best and freshest blood back to itself. While serving others is a key part of our lives, loving and caring for ourselves and our own bodies is essential to serving others well.

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