

# Cranial Therapy: A Manual Approach for Improved Health

By Ayelet Connell, PhD, PT, IMT, C

**C**ranial Therapy is a gentle hands-on therapy that can augment the health and regeneration of the nervous system, specifically the brain and spinal cord. It corrects tension patterns in the head and strengthens the cranial rhythm, which can reduce many different symptoms, including headaches and learning challenges as well as behavioral disorders. It can be an important component of a treatment program for Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and Multiple Sclerosis. It can be used for a variety of other issues, including aggressive behaviors, hypersensitivity to sound, attention deficit, tinnitus, and so much more.

The cranial system houses our brain. Within the cranium, there is cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), which nourishes the brain and provides immune support, and layers of tissue, called meninges, that surround the brain and protect it from trauma and infection.

## Motilities Provide Information on Health

For many years, the allopathic community believed that the sutures (joints) of the cranium solidified at a young age and no longer moved. We've since learned that, using very gentle cranial therapy techniques, movement can be felt on the head. This movement is called a motility. Motilities or biologic rhythms are movements that represent the physiologic health of specific tissues and systems. One example of a motility is our pulse, which reflects the health of our arterial system. Feeling the pulse on different parts of the body provides us with information about the circulatory health of that part of our body. There are many different motilities that can be felt on the body. Manual therapists practicing Cranial Therapy will monitor a patient's cranial rhythm as part of the therapy.

## Founded in the Late 1800s

The history of Cranial Therapy is derived from Cranial Osteopathy, which was founded by osteopath William Sutherland in the late 1800s. Dr. Sutherland recognized that the ends of a cranial bone located on each side of the head, called the temporal bone, were beveled. He hypothesized that the joint surfaces were beveled for a reason, "...beveled, like the gills of a fish, indicating articular mobility for a respiratory mechanism." Dr. Sutherland identified an

inhalation and exhalation movement (motility) in the cranium with a correlated movement at the sacrum.

Since his discoveries, the field of cranial osteopathy and cranial therapy has been furthered by many practitioners, including osteopathic physician, John Upledger, who published a book on his version of cranial therapy, which he called Craniosacral Therapy – a discipline widely practiced today.

## Integrative Manual Therapy: Increased Mobility, Decreased Pain, Better Health

Another developer who has contributed to the field of Cranial Therapy is Sharon Weiselfish-Giammatteo, PhD, PT, IMT, C. Her brand of cranial therapy is part of a larger field of study called Integrative Manual Therapy (IMT). Integrative Manual Therapy is a field of manual medicine that follows an integrated systems approach. This system takes into account that the body is comprised of many different systems, such as the circulatory system, the connective tissue system, bone, muscle, organs, and so on.

Any one of these systems can be compromised and lead to problems that can affect multiple systems. Practitioners who practice IMT, such as physical therapists, massage therapists, occupational therapists, chiropractic physicians, and others, use hands-on diagnostics to determine which areas in the body are restricted, and which systems are involved in those regions. Implementing specific IMT techniques, which are chosen based on the manual diagnostics, can lead to improved mobility, decreased pain, and a greater level of health.

Dr. Giammatteo's doctoral studies focused on the adult neurologically impaired person as well as individuals who have suffered traumatic brain injuries. During her research she discovered how to influence deeper neurologic tissues using manual therapy and specifically, cranial therapy. Cranial therapy as presented in the field of IMT is very comprehensive. Dr. Giammatteo's contributions to the larger field of Cranial Therapy include discovery of multiple different motilities or rhythms that relate to the cranial system, beyond the general cranial rhythm. In addition, she developed many reflexogenic techniques to address neurologic dysfunction. This form of cranial therapy addresses superficial structures, such as the cranial bones

and the meninges, as well as deeper structures, including the cortical lobes of the brain and even deeper subcortical tissues such as the thalamus, the pituitary gland, and the limbic system.

## **Improvements in Walking, Mental Clarity, Speech, Swallowing, Tremors and Much More**

Cranial therapy can augment the health of our nervous system, which is a core component of all neurodegenerative disorders, including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and Multiple Sclerosis. With these diseases there is a degeneration or breakdown of the nervous system in a part of the body or systemically. Cranial therapy can be an important component of a treatment program. Practitioners practicing cranial therapy on an individual with a neurodegenerative disorder can improve the health of the nervous system, which can lead to improvements in walking, mental clarity, speech, swallowing, tremors, and much more.

## **Alignment, Fatigue and Chronic Pain**

People who suffer from neurodegenerative disorders generally have breakdowns in other systems as well, such as the circulatory system and the immune system. Often, there is biomechanical dysfunction, which means that the sacrum, pelvis, and spine are out of alignment. When the spine is out of alignment, this can contribute to problems with walking as well as fatigue syndromes and chronic pain. Using Integrative Manual Therapy to target other systems of the body can improve walking and reduce other symptoms as well as improve overall health.

## **Sound Sensitivity, ADHD, Tinnitus, Etc.**

Cranial therapy can be used for a variety of other issues including aggressive behaviors, hypersensitivity to sound, attention deficit, tinnitus (ringing in the ears), and so much more. For example, one commonly found pattern in adults with ringing in the ears, as well as in children with autism, is compression of the inner ear. Within the inner ear, there are multiple important structures for hearing, including the cochlea, ear drum, vestibular nerve, and more. When

combined into the vestibular mechanism, these structures are not much larger than a peanut. They reside inside the ear, bordering the temporal bone. When there is severe compression, this peanut sized vestibular mechanism within the inner ear pushes up against the temporal bone. This can contribute to significant hypersensitivity to sound as well. Using cranial therapy, a therapist can decompress the inner ear which can lead to reduced signs and symptoms at the ear.

## **Aggressive Behavior**

Another example is alleviation of aggressive behaviors, such as those commonly found in children on the autism spectrum or adults who have incurred traumatic brain injuries. Aggressive behaviors stem from a very specific part of the brain, the limbic system. The limbic system is the core part of our brain—the part that we share with animals—the reptilian brain. It's the part of our brain associated with survival mode and rage response. When the limbic system is in a state of dysfunction a range of behaviors may surface, including self-injurious behavior, aggression, and obsessive compulsive behaviors. IMT and cranial therapy are wonderful tools to treat the limbic system when it is in a state of dysfunction.

Dealing with disease or severe cranial/head symptoms adds a lot of stress to the body. Cranial therapy specifically addresses the central nervous system and can reduce overall stress. Cranial therapy does not need to replace another part of the treatment program but can be a wonderful addition to promote neurologic health.

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