

Listening with My Hands: Palpation and CranioSacral Therapy

Palpation is in many ways the essence of cranioSacral therapy. Briefly put, palpation is how a therapist uses his or her hands to get information about what is going on with a client. The use of palpation in standard (allopathic) medicine has become much reduced. CranioSacral therapists, however, rely on palpation to a degree unmatched by any other modality I know of.

In most allopathic practices, palpation is limited to feeling for swelling or stiffness such as in the lymph nodes or abdomen. It is also still used to a lesser degree as a measure of heat in inflammatory conditions. However, even in this case, it is more common to use a thermometer and to look only for systemic effects such as fever. The information that a cranioSacral therapist gains through palpation is much, much broader; and cranioSacral therapists train to develop their sense of touch much as wine tasters train to develop their sense of taste.

For instance, one of the first things that a cranioSacral therapist is taught is how to feel the cranial rhythm. This is a subtle but essential physiological rhythm with a frequency of 6-12 cycles per minute, which is clearly distinct from any other cycle in the body such as the respiratory or heart rhythms. The first task in following the cranial rhythm is to pick it out from all the other things that are going on in the body at the same time.

Next, a cranioSacral Therapist must learn to discern four attributes about the cranioSacral rhythm: its symmetry, amplitude, quality and rate. These four attributes provide the therapist with essential information about what is going on in the client's body which would otherwise be missed and which assist the therapist to develop a treatment plan for the client in that particular session. Still, this is only the beginning. As their training progresses, cranioSacral therapists become tuned to ever more subtle variations in the messages they are receiving through their hands, and it is through listening with their hands that they are able to elicit activate the body's own internal healing wisdom

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