

Every Body Has A Story To Tell

'The body's life is the life of sensations and emotions. The body feels real hunger, real thirst, real joy in the sun and snow, real pleasure in the smell of roses or the look of a lilac bush; real anger, real sorrow, real tenderness, real warmth, real passion, real hate, real grief. All the emotions belong to the body and are only recognized by the mind.' D.H. Lawrence.

All of us have been overwhelmed at some time in our life by difficult or traumatic experiences. These might be physical or emotional in origin. It usually helps to talk about such experiences later. Just as it is necessary to process these experiences through thinking and talking about them, it is also necessary to process them physically. The body holds shapes around traumatic and painful experiences. These shapes are defensive patterns that prevent us from really feeling what has happened to us at a time when it is too overwhelming to do so. When we feel overwhelmed we restrict the feeling of overwhelm by restricting ourselves. We hold our breath, pull up our shoulders and tighten muscles to contain the sensations of anxiety and fear that threaten to overwhelm us. By doing so we freeze parts of our past in our tissues, cutting them off from the rest of us, so that as we continue with our lives there is always some of us that is not present. Yet those parts of us that we have exiled to the past tend to turn up again in the present in the form of depression, irritability, anxiety attacks, irrational anger, bad dreams, exhaustion, difficulty in concentrating, phobias or physical symptoms.

Craniosacral Therapy approaches the body by listening to how it expresses itself at any given moment. This is done by resting the hands gently on the body and sensing the underlying qualities and shapes that the tissues hold. Cranial touch is non-invasive. Indeed, clients aren't even required to undress. It is the gentle and non-invasive nature of Craniosacral Therapy that enables the tissues to tell their own story, without any agenda being set by the therapist. The listening hand of the therapist may detect many different levels of experience and holding of shapes around the experience. These can be felt as patterns of muscle tension, bony compression's, membranous twists and pulls in the connective tissues, agitation's and abnormal fluctuations of the body fluids or cycling energies within the Central Nervous System. Permeating all these different levels is a Vital Force known in Craniosacral Therapy as the Breath of Life. The bioenergetic potency of the Breath of Life is taken up by the fluids and tissues of the body, causing every cell in the body to pulsate. This potency is the primary driving force around which embryological development occurs and continues to support cellular organisation throughout life. Thus it is said to carry the Original Matrix of who we are.

In response to pain and trauma the body organises itself the best way it can at the time. By listening to these patterns of organisation and reflecting them back to the body with subtle responses in the level of touch, the tissues become aware of them and are able to let go of them. Thus the Original Matrix is able to reinstate itself. This is similar to the way in which a counsellor or psychotherapist may reflect something back to us and we suddenly become aware of an emotion that we only dimly felt before or a limiting way of seeing things that we have been holding. In the same way Craniosacral Therapy enables the body to complete somatic processes it has become stuck in. It is as if the tissues tell their story and in doing so can begin to breath again. Clients often feel more present after treatment, as they literally become more of who they are.

The release of trauma patterns may be experienced in many ways by clients. There may be sensations such as tingling, pulsation or heat, emotional releases or vivid images and memories. Craniosacral Therapists recognise and respect the wisdom of the body in organising itself around trauma, so do not push anyone into processing these shapes before they are ready. Instead, much of the work is concerned with building up internal resources, so that it then becomes safe to visit these difficult places within us without being overwhelmed as we were before. A sense of spaciousness and ease can be encouraged around the pattern of holding, so that it is eventually able to melt away without becoming overwhelming and re-traumatising.

Many experiences may leave patterns of traumatic holding in the body. These may be extreme life threatening events such as car crashes, muggings or rape. In America

Craniosacral Therapy has been used very successfully to treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in veterans of the Vietnam War. Simple accidents such as a bad fall or blow may also leave residue patterns in the tissues. Perhaps the incident happened at a time when we were very stressed or we have been brought up to 'pull ourselves together and get on with it', thus not allowing ourselves to process the shock in our systems. Emotional issues such as relationship break ups, moving home, changing job and everyday stresses and strains can also either temporarily overwhelm us or become more deeply ingrained within us, limiting our ability to move on in life. Childhood experiences, birth trauma and even pre-natal events leave very powerful shapes, for as we grow we are shaped around these shapes, just a tree may grow and shape itself around a fence or pole.

Case Studies

H. is in her fifties. She came to me suffering from severe arthritis. We worked together over many months. During that time many shapes, all superimposed on each other, emerged and were processed. These began as general feelings of frustration and 'stuckness', but as the process deepened, vivid images and more specific sensations arose. In Craniosacral Therapy we talk about 'tissue memory'. The tissues are able to hold onto experience, in a similar way to magnetic tape can hold onto a sound and play it back later. We visited many difficult places together during the course of our work together, such as remembering the day of her birth, when she was manhandled and isolated by medical staff. She experienced this as if actually being there, but was now able to revisit this time of overwhelm with all the resources of her adult life. During this process her arthritic pain has diminished so much, she is mostly not aware of it anymore. She has more vitality and feels more at ease with herself than ever before in her life.

F. is in her sixties. She came for treatment because her scalp was very sensitive and became painful if she wore hats or went out in the wind. She also experienced pain and tension in her neck and upper back. Her cervical vertebrae were very compressed, locking up her neck and her shoulders were pulled up towards her ears. After several sessions she suddenly leapt up from the couch and began sobbing. Afterwards she told me she had re-experienced falling into a pond at the age of two and almost drowning. The shock had caused her to contract into her neck. Although she had long ago forgotten this, the shape remained and had caught up with her later in life. Soon after she reported she was able to go paddling at the sea side with her grand-children and for the first time in years suffered no pain even though it was a very windy day.

Not all somatic process work involves the specific events being remembered. Sometimes we become aware of 'feeling tones' - these are subtle qualities of experience underlying our more obvious forms of perception that can inform us to how we are on a very profound level. We can hold feeling tones around particular incidents, but also around more general qualities of being. These may also become condensed and held in the tissues when they are difficult to tolerate.

D. is in his thirties. He came to me with a sense of curiosity about the general level of tension he felt present in his body. As we deepened into the work he became aware of qualities of vulnerability and grief that he had not been in contact with before. Whilst growing up it had not been safe for him to express such feelings and he struggled with feelings of shame and being exposed as they arose. We worked with the tones of these feelings as they were felt in his body, gradually enabling him to tolerate what was previously overwhelming by coming into contact with them and withdrawing from them at a safe pace. This occurred in an atmosphere of developing trust in myself and the process. Today he feels much less tense, more able to enjoy his own body and to express his needs more fully to himself and others.

Working with feeling tones and tissue memory we may access very early experiences, such as those connected with pre-natal life, birth or babyhood, that are difficult to put into words, as they are by their very nature pre-verbal. This also allows us to work directly with babies themselves.

C. is five months old. He was brought be his parents, being very fractious and suffering from eczema. His parents have found adapting to his arrival very hard. He is very different in nature than his two year old brother, who was a very placid baby. Finding it difficult to cope they ended up shouting at C, leaving him to cry and the relationship between mother and father also began to suffer. With the onset of the eczema during all this, they began to realize what they were doing and decided to seek help. I found C to be very rigid and holding on to a lot of shock. He was also very responsive to the treatment and soon began to soften. I worked also with the parents, encouraging them to feel what was happening in their bodies and softening around their own patterns of holding. They were both willing and courageous in the work. It is not easy for parents to accept they have may have hurt their child, yet it is something we all have done at sometime. They were also seeing a medical herbalist and the combination of the two therapies enabled things to move very quickly. C's eczema disappeared within a few weeks. He went through a period of expressing a great deal of rage, which I prepared the parents for and they were able to tolerate, so that he could feel safe to let these feelings arise and be expressed. For the first time they began to feel a real connection with him and today he is an expressive and contented baby.

Matthew Appleton