

Unwinding: The Core of Cranio-Sacral Work

Andrew Still, founder of Osteopathy and teacher of William Sutherland - considered the father of Cranial work said – “It is the physician’s responsibility to find health, anybody can find disease.” Substitute “physician” with “bodyworker”, and consider for a moment what this means to you. How do you seek health in your clients?

Still’s suggestion is central to Cranial work. At the core of this practice is the trust in a force within the body that moves inherently and insistentlly toward health and optimal functioning. All Cranial techniques are built on this trust and assist the practitioner in discovering and optimizing the health present in clients. “Unwinding” is a specific and fascinating technique commonly used in Cranial work toward this end.

Consider this analogy: Have you had the experience of finding the solution to a problem simply by talking to a friend who patiently listens, witnessing you as you wind your way through your experience, eventually untangling your own knot? The body is no different than your mind. It is fundamentally geared toward finding solutions to its problems, has all information it needs, and an irrevocable force moving it toward health. In “unwinding” practitioners access this force by actively listening to the body, and then following and supporting it wherever it wants to go.

A few years ago a couple of students discovered the power of this technique in an advanced Cranial-sacral class. During a break, Valerie asked Phil to do some deep tissue work on her shoulders where she had significant chronic pain. Phil, a skilled myofascial bodyworker, began digging into Val’s muscle with his elbow. In an effort to harness a learning opportunity, I challenged them to use what they were studying in class by experimenting with unwinding. They agreed and for twenty minutes Phil listened to Val’s tight knotted muscles, patiently following their movements, and in so doing, unwinding these painful muscles. Val deeply relaxed and the tension in her shoulders released. So profound was this experience that it totally sold both practitioners on Cranial work. Days

later, Val reported that her shoulder remained free of the chronic pain she'd lived with for years.

So, what happens in unwinding? The primary goal is to follow the structure (an arm, neck, muscle, organ, etc.) wherever it wants to go. For example, you might pick up an arm that suffers from frozen shoulder, supporting it with your hands by placing one at the wrist the other just distal to the elbow. You ask the client to let you “borrow” their arm, and hold it in a neutral place, suspending the force of gravity thus removing the effort or stress created in weight bearing. Then you listen and follow the arc of the movement – a subtle movement inherent within the arm at that particular moment in time. This movement relates to the way the cranial wave is moving through the system and can be felt in every part of the body. The arm will move into its inertia, its problem, and its optimal compensation pattern. As you hold the arm, you simply follow its movement and listen deeply, without expectations and without imposing external movement.

The movement is not directed by you or by your client's musculature, but by an intrinsic movement that stems from the cerebro-spinal fluid. The movement is arch like, often rounded, swirling around an inertial fulcrum. The movement might be very small, imperceptible to the eye, but can be felt by you and the client. Or it might be big, involving the whole arm, possibly other parts of the body. This unwinding can go on for a long time and include multiple pauses each holding the potential for healing.

Naturally, more than one treatment is often required to resolve longstanding issues. Sometimes it turns out that there is an underlying problem that needs addressing. But it is the ability to listen patiently while the body finds its way back to health and optimal movement, away from pain and inertia, that is one of the greatest gifts you can give your client.

Unwinding can be done with any part of the body—a limb, the head, the trunk, a bone, a muscle, or a joint. It can be effective as part of any treatment and it can be easily learned. Try it!