

What Is Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy?

I have read many introductions to biodynamic craniosacral therapy (BCST), participated in hundreds of conversations on the topic, and have been confronted about the “quackery” of BCST from a scientific standpoint. I agree, it is hard to understand what BCST is and how it works based on how my own field tries to explain it.

In studying traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and attending seminars and talks given by medical doctors who are acupuncturists and have decided to lecture on acupuncture to non-TCM health practitioners (some names include [Dr. Nadia Volf](#), [Dr. Leslie Smith](#), and [Dr. David Miller](#)), I have realized that the main issue that leads to misunderstanding of the alternative medicine field is communication.

As the western medical paradigm uses a certain language and methodology to explain the physiological cascade leading to illness or health, traditional Chinese medicine and biodynamic craniosacral therapy also use complete different languages and methodologies based on completely different medical traditions and paradigms. Therefore when, for example, TCM tries to explain itself to the western medical world it often translates as being nonsensical and unscientific because of the language barrier. It's like an American going to China and trying to ask for a sandwich in English. Not only is English not the main language in China, but sandwiches are also not a staple in the Chinese diet.

With this in mind, I have tried to develop an explanation of BCST that would also make sense from a western medical paradigm. The explanation therefore begins with explaining a part of the nervous system, specifically the autonomic nervous system (ANS) and its two branches: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic.

The ANS functions at the subconscious level to maintain homeostatic vital functions. It's in charge of most organ functions that keep us alive moment to moment that we never have to think or worry about. Some examples are blood pressure, blood flow, body temperature, breathing, and digesting and eliminating food. The ANS has two divisions: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. The sympathetic emerges from the middle part of the spine spanning from the level of the shoulders to the level of the belly button and is responsible for what is called the “fight-or-flight” state. If there is a bear chasing you, you're running fast, furiously, efficiently, and effectively thanks to your sympathetic nervous system. The parasympathetic is its counterpart. It's often called the “rest-and-digest” state. It emerges from parts of the brainstem and parts of the sacrum (your “tailbone”). It is responsible for replenishing resources and repairing any part of the body that has suffered during the day, which includes any stress that has burdened the body in some way. Examples may include having been almost hit by a car while crossing the street, having been anxious, worried, or depressed about a work deadline or a troubling relationship all day, or having locked yourself out of your house or car by accident.

Ideally these two divisions of the ANS balance each other out. For every stressful experience that activates the sympathetic nervous system there should be an equal amount of downtime for the parasympathetic nervous system to can kick in and repair the damage. Unfortunately our modern world often does not afford us that time. So the nervous system (NS) has to prioritize what is important to deal with immediately and what can wait to be dealt with in another moment.

The priority list is as follows:

1. Your vital functions. It's fundamental that your heart keeps beating, that you take in oxygen and get rid of carbon dioxide efficiently, and that your kidneys filters your blood, etc. Nothing takes priority over maintaining vital functions.
2. What you subject your nervous system to. If you are running to work, your nervous system has to adapt by making sure your body can keep up with the demands you are putting on it in the moment. If it didn't, you'd just pass out in the middle of the street because your cells would not be getting enough oxygen (one of the many things that would go wrong if your nervous system didn't pay attention to the increase in metabolic demands placed on it as you raced to work).
3. Your emotions. If you're angry, your nervous system has to accommodate for the increase in heat and metabolic needs that are required to be angry. If you're depressed, your nervous system has to accommodate to the decrease in oxygen because you are breathing not as deeply as you usually do. Less oxygen = less energy.
4. Your past injuries, both physical and emotional. Sadly, last on the list are all the things that happened in the past. So anything that is not happening right now is included in “the past.” Your nervous system gives priority always to what is happening right now. If it's not happening now and you are in a state of stress, it will be stored and addressed later. The only problem with this beautifully designed system is that the system is organized around the idea that there will be downtime every day to address the stressors that have been stored. If there is no downtime, past injuries continue to be stored long term in the tissues of the body. And, as you can imagine, there is a limit to how much can be stored in the tissues before damage starts to manifest as a consequence of storing.

Bear in mind that the body is always oriented toward health and does its best to keep you functioning at your most optimal state with the conditions it is presented with. So if you are stressed or ill, it is still oriented toward optimal functioning and health within the parameters and resources available to it, even though from your perspective your body is not working as well as it “should” or “use to.”

Before I address what biodynamic craniosacral therapy is, I have to address one more component of the ANS and the sympathetic and parasympathetic states.

The function of the central nervous system (CNS) in general is to keep you alive. Included in this is a built-in ability to sense and judge danger vs. safety. When you are in danger your sympathetic nervous system turns on and you prepare to either fight or run away. When you are safe, you can rest and so your sympathetics turn off and the parasympathetic nervous system turns on.

How do you know if you are safe or in danger? If you think about it for a second, it's not entirely obvious all the time. There often isn't a clear sign that says you are in danger or you are safe. You could be taking the same route to work that you've taken a hundred times before and you suddenly feel like something's not quite right. Within a couple of seconds from out of nowhere a car slams into your car. Where did that feeling come from and what part of you was aware of the incoming danger? The feeling came from your nervous system, and it was your nervous system that was aware of the incoming danger.

The nervous system evaluates itself and its external environment every 1/100 of a second. It does this for two reasons: first, to make sure all systems are functioning and performing as they should on the inside of the body and second, to be sure that it is safe, more accurately that you are safe. Back, a long time ago, when we had to worry about being attacked

by other creatures in nature, our nervous system was the "sixth sense" that kept us well informed of when it was time to start running.

So what is biodynamic craniosacral therapy?

BCST is a healing modality that takes your body out of the sympathetic state and into the parasympathetic state. The transition from fight-flight to rest-digest is imperative to healing. Without that transition, the body is unable to go from maintenance mode to repair mode and therefore is unable to heal. When you are ill you are resting and sleeping all the time because that is the only state that will allow for healing to happen.

How does a biodynamic craniosacral therapist take the body from the sympathetic state to the parasympathetic?

Since the nervous system of every living thing is built to detect what is going on in its external environment, it is also able to detect other nervous systems nearby. BCST therapists are trained to put their own nervous system into the parasympathetic state and maintain that state at will. The client's nervous system, inherently evaluating the state of the practitioner's nervous system due to proximity, will eventually begin to copy the practitioner's nervous system. An easy way of explaining how this is possible is by comparing it to how our mood changes when we are around happy, sad, or angry people. If we are in the presence of a sad person, we find ourselves feeling sad after a while. If we are around a happy person their happiness is often "contagious" and we will leave them feeling happy as well. If you are near another person who is calm (in the parasympathetic state), you too will feel calm despite having had a stressful day.

I often get asked how it is possible to have such deep healing happen when I sit next to my clients and seemingly "do nothing." The answer is in the subtle mechanisms of the nervous system. No manipulation or deep pressure is necessary when you tap into the parasympathetic state and afford the body the time and space it needs to start repairing the damage that has built up over weeks, months or decades. It depends on the condition, but I have seen complete elimination of chronic symptoms in as little as two sessions and as long as a year with sessions once a week. Biodynamic craniosacral therapy is not esoteric. It is based on the principals of physiology. The misunderstanding, I believe, comes from the language barrier between healing modalities, not from disagreement on the principals and requirements necessary for healing to happen in the body.