

LS WELLNESS



ALT-THERAPY: Penelope van Maasdyk became a practitioner after CST 'opened her heart'

Picture: RUVAN BOSHOF

Craniosacral therapists use their hands to coax away the 'bad energy' exacerbating health problems, writes Leigh-Anne Hunter

PENELOPE van Maasdyk is barefoot as she leads me into her Cape Town studio where she gives craniosacral therapy treatments. She exudes warmth and kindness, necessary traits in her work. "Powerful things happen in a treatment," she says. "People need to feel they can trust me."

Van Maasdyk trained under craniosacral therapy teacher Kitya Nowicki. "I went to one of her demonstrations. As she treated me, my heart popped open. I thought, 'There's something powerful in this.' So I embarked on her training programme."

Nowicki, a craniosacral therapist for 16 years, says she felt limited in her previous career as a physiotherapist. "I was frustrated. I didn't understand how a patient's symptoms were linked. Craniosacral therapy pulled it all together."

Over the phone, Nowicki's voice is non-sense. "We don't heal; we assist the body to access its innate intelligence. Many conditions arise because your nervous system is triggered and you introduce a 'state of defence'. That can be prevented by having a good flow in the system."

She says the therapy originated in the findings of an osteopath, William Sutherland, in the 1930s.

"These show that cells in the body express a rhythmic movement fundamental to life ... called craniosacral motion," Nowicki says, comparing this movement to ocean tides. "Cerebrospinal fluid, which bathes the brain and spinal cord, expresses this motion." A craniosacral therapist can feel this in their hands. Following this tidal flow, they can tune into "congestion" in the body.

"In response to physical knocks or emotional stress, the body's tissues contract and sometimes, particularly when the shock is severe, the tissue stays contracted. Any tensions which remain in the body restrict its functioning."

Through light touch, the body is "allowed" to release this tension.

Nowicki says the therapy can help people to manage almost any condition and recover from trauma even 30 years

after the event.

There are critics, however, who call craniosacral therapy a pseudoscience, among them Stephen Barrett, a US psychiatrist and co-founder of the National Council Against Health Fraud. On his website, "Quackwatch: Your Guide to Quackery [and] Health Fraud", he published the article, "Why Cranial Therapy Is Silly". In it, he dismisses the therapy's claims, such as that "small cranial pulsations can be felt with the fingertips", as fanciful.

But Nowicki believes the method fills a gap. "These days we see a lot of chronic symptoms that doctors don't have solutions for and can only manage with medication." The basis of craniosacral

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therapy, she says, reflects current thinking that the mind and body are one system.

"Our biology changes depending on circumstances and our nervous system helps us do that. But we get stuck in a defence programme which compromises survival. CST helps unlock that defence. The body responds to touch as a sign of safety." She says that while little research into the therapy has been done until now, recent studies are beginning to tap into its potential. "We're starting to think that cerebrospinal fluid holds a kind of biological evolutionary memory."

Because craniosacral therapy helps to "teach" the body to relax (people can nod off during a treatment), Nowicki says it's especially helpful for treating insomnia and so-called "monkey mind". Children, she says, respond particularly well. "Kids I've been treating are no longer classified ADHD kids."

Through her training programmes, she hopes to create more interest in the therapy in South Africa, where she says it is still a new concept. "We don't have

enough craniosacral therapists in South Africa. I'd love to train people who can take CST into rural communities where it could have a huge impact."

Back in Van Maasdyk's studio, I'm lying fully clothed on a massage table. Craniosacral therapists don't need to touch the skin to feel the body's internal rhythms. "It's reading the body with my hands," says Van Maasdyk, who describes sensations of "intense heat and ice cold" in her hands during treatments as trauma in the body is shifted. "The cranium and sacrum are the areas where the parasympathetic nerves exit and so holding them takes the client out of fight-or-flight mode." She smiles. "But it's much more complicated than that."

There's no song and dance. Van Maasdyk stands in silence, holding parts of my body for a long time. When she does move her fingers, it's barely perceptible. "Each body has its own stories. My job is to listen."

"Adrenal burnout is an issue I see a lot. The body hasn't been allowed to express stress, so as I hold some people they will sob or convulse. People can't break down in the world because there's nobody there to hold them."

A few sessions are recommended. "Over time there's a gentler release. The body learns to deal with things between the sessions. That's the joy — that people take something away with them. I'm never going to be a millionaire, but I'm content because I'm showing people a way back into their own being." **LS**

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