

Biodynamic *Craniosacral* Therapy

An Energetic Take on a Classic Modality

By Scott Zamurat, RCST

Craniosacral therapy is one of the most widely recognized modalities of somatic therapy. Many bodyworkers have gained familiarity with this gentlest of somatic healing forms, which has a track record of clinical efficacy in a wide range of situations.

In recent years, a new understanding of this work has become increasingly popular in our healing arts community. Biodynamic craniosacral therapy (BCST) offers an understanding of the work as an energy medicine modality.

THE HISTORY OF THE PRACTICE

The origins of BCST are found in the life work of an osteopathic physician named William Garner Sutherland. While still in osteopathic college in 1899, Sutherland was examining a disarticulated skull on display in a school hallway and was struck with the thought that the bones of the skull are “beveled like the gills of a fish, indicating articular mobility for a respiratory mechanism.”¹ This was in direct contrast to the belief held at that time (and in some circles to this day) that the bones of the skull were fused and immobile.

This thought—that the core physiology of the human body is a respiratory system, and the bones are designed to allow for this rhythmic movement—carried great power.

Sutherland began to research this aspect and function of the anatomy and physiology of the human body, while simultaneously exploring its healing implications on himself and his clients. As part of his investigation into “primary respiration,” as he called this movement, Sutherland spent years studying the anatomy of the skull in great detail. The foundations of Sutherland’s teachings are found in an intimate understanding of the anatomy of the cranium and sacrum, the articulations of the bones, the meninges, the cerebrospinal fluid-filled spaces of the neural tube, and the inherent motion present within this whole integrated core of the human body.

During his 50-plus years in practice, Sutherland evolved his understanding of what became known as osteopathy in the



cranial field (often shortened to cranial osteopathy), and his clinical work shifted from a biomechanical model to an energetic model. This evolution can be seen in his written work, and in material published since his passing.² In the latter half of the 1940s, Sutherland began to introduce his direct perceptions of life energy at work within the system into his teachings and writings. At the time, there was very little language available for Sutherland to explain the phenomenon of life energy to his students, so he used metaphoric language, referring to life energy as “potency,” “the fluid within the fluid,” “the ‘juice’ in the electric battery,” “the sheet lightning in the cloud,” and “the liquid light.”³

Despite the clear evolution in Sutherland’s understanding and application of cranial osteopathy from biomechanical to bioenergetic, his biomechanical teachings had a greater historical influence, in part because it is easier to learn biomechanical techniques in a straightforward protocol, and in part because his energetic revelations came later in life and were not fully incorporated into his teaching curriculum. Instead, his student and friend Rollin E. Becker, DO, advanced the recognition of bioenergy as the primary factor in the healing process, and Becker’s significant additions to this understanding form the foundation of BCST. His observations and discoveries are key to understanding how BCST differs from other forms of craniosacral therapy.

Many practitioners have carried on the work of Sutherland within the field of osteopathic practice. Outside the osteopathic community, John E. Upledger, DO, began to teach something he called craniosacral therapy in the

1970s. Upledger brought a particular form and framework to this work. His endeavors have been critical in the creation of a defined craniosacral profession and practice outside of the osteopathic framework. His work is taught by the Upledger Institute all around the world.

BIOENERGY AS THE SOURCE OF HEALTH AND HEALING

At the heart of BCST is the relationship a practitioner establishes with a client’s primary respiration. Primary respiration, so called because it precedes “secondary respiration” or the breathing of air, encompasses a range of subtle rhythmic movements, each of which has unique characteristics and healing properties. These rhythms express themselves in more than just the tissues of the body; they are an energetic phenomena that moves through the whole body and biofield of all living beings.

Primary respiration came to be known by several names in an effort to describe its palpatory feel, as well as the mystery of its patterns and potency. With its inhalation and exhalation cycles, it was originally named the “Breath of Life” by Sutherland, with all its attendant spiritual connotations. It was revered as “intelligent and purposeful” by Sutherland and those who came after him—“an intelligent, physiological functioning that transcends all others in the body,” an “unerring potency.”⁴

In the early teachings of cranial osteopathy, the ebbing and flowing movement of primary respiration was likened to the tides of the ocean, and so the whole systemic rhythm came to be called “the Tide.” In time, the Breath of Life was recognized as being what



Cultivating a deep state of listening allows for a direct relationship to the biodynamic energy in the client. *Model Michelle Anderson.*

we call “life energy.” Becker termed it “biodynamic energy,” from which this form of craniosacral therapy derives its name. In essence, these terms—*Breath of Life, primary respiration, the Tide, biodynamic energy*—are synonymous, yet they articulate differing facets of the same phenomenon.

On the most practical level, what Becker termed “biodynamic energy” is what every BCST practitioner aligns with as a touchstone throughout a session. Practitioners palpate the biodynamic energy as rhythmic cycles of energy that create, sustain, and transform the living body. This energy does not differentiate between systems of the body, parts of the body, or even energetic aspects of being. It does not comply with our artificial distinctions between the head and the heart, the spirit and the body, a localized injury



or symptomology. It moves through and heals the whole being of the client on our table. It is a holistic, unified source and expression of life at all levels of our being.

The hallmark of a BCST approach is a direct orientation to the universal and conditional forces of life. In this approach, the practitioner:

1. Settles into a still and receptive state of being.
2. Clearly negotiates a relationship with the client and their system.
3. Orients to the presence of primary respiration.
4. Waits for a shift within the client's system to this formative ordering force.
5. Creates a safe container within which the inherent healing process is choreographed by the Breath of Life.

THE PRINCIPLES OF BIODYNAMIC CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY

BCST follows five principles:⁵

1. HOLISM

Holism is the recognition of the fundamental truth of biological life: every being is complete in every moment, the living body functions as a unified whole, and individual beings are inseparable from the larger environment they inhabit. Life is seamless and without fragmentation. It is only the cognitive process of human

beings that has divided the body into anatomical parts and physiological systems. In BCST, we acknowledge this activity of human cognition but respect its limitations, knowing that the loss of a holistic perspective on the part of the BCST therapist can result in limiting the healing potential of the client's system. When we practice, we are in relationship with the wholeness of a living person; when we touch part of the system, we are touching the whole of the system.

2. ENERGY ORGANIZES FORM, MOTION, AND FUNCTION

With the recognition of the Breath of Life, or biodynamic energy, an essential principle of BCST emerges: the living system is organized by energetic forces. The Breath of Life expresses itself as primary respiration, seen as cycles of inhalation and exhalation in alignment with the midline of the body. This movement is without restriction, unless the living system is impacted by disease or shock/trauma.

Following this principle, we understand that disease and shock/trauma are also energetic in nature; they are energetic intrusions that interfere with the free expression of primary respiration. When these forces enter the living system (Becker called them "biokinetic forces"), they are held in stasis by the biodynamic energy as a protective function to minimize

their impact on our physiological health. These areas of stasis are known as "inertial fulcrums." The intrusive energies are held until the biodynamic energy can safely process and release these energies.

3. THE INHERENT HEALING PROCESS

There are many perspectives to the understanding of what constitutes healing and many approaches, philosophies, and techniques for how to bring this about. The key evolutionary step in BCST is a movement into a participatory model in which the living intelligence of the system, the Breath of Life, orchestrates a sequence of events that resolves inertial forces. The resolution of inertial forces, in turn, allows for a reorganization of form, function, and inherent motion of the system, restoring itself to its pattern of health. This sequence of events, which reveals itself to a practitioner who has refined their skills to accurately and compassionately witness the reorganizing phenomena of bioenergy, is an inherent healing process. My teacher, Franklyn Sills, the pioneering teacher of BCST, has called this the "inherent treatment plan."⁶

When a practitioner partners with the bioenergy of the client, they are orienting to the original and inherent health of that client, not their "dis-ease."



An integrating contact at the neck brings balance to the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems—essential in shock resolution.

The bioenergy of a living system always seeks balance, resolution, and health—it *is self-healing*. This is the inherent healing process that we observe as a practitioner.

4. INERTIAL FULCRUMS ORGANIZE SHOCK

The consequences of unresolved inertial fulcrums within the human system are expressed as a multitude of detrimental signs and symptoms—injury, illness, psycho-emotional imbalances, etc. We can also recognize that the combined result of all these detrimental expressions within an individual manifests through all levels of being. When unresolved inertial forces within the system are held in stasis by the Breath of Life and produce negative influences within the life of an individual, this total pattern of expression is called “shock.” BCST recognizes that the resolution of inertial energies by the Breath of Life is in essence the resolution of shock and trauma.

The Breath of Life is like a wise gardener who works by pulling the weeds out by the roots. While it is easy to see the parts of the weed that grow above the ground—flowers, leaves, and stems—it is the root of the plant that supports its life. In removing the roots from the earth, the gardener ensures the weed has no ground from which to regrow. In the same way, resolving inertia is the healing of shock at its root,

leaving the symptoms and manifestations of shock bereft of their foundation. As a living system reorganizes around the midline and other natural fulcrums in the last phase of the inherent healing process, the manifestations of shock (shock affect, cycling, hyperactivation, dissociative states, and so forth) dissolve, and health is restored through all levels of the system.

5. HEALING HAPPENS IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

Regardless of when an inertial fulcrum became stored in a client’s system, the activity of the bioenergy resolving that inertia happens in the present moment. While a client may experience the memories, feeling states, thought processes, etc., of a past event during the unfolding of the inherent healing process, the practitioner recognizes that these specific aspects of past experience are energies organized around an unresolved inertial fulcrum. In other words, a trauma from the past has remained active in the present state of the client’s system. As inertial energies are resolved during a session, these aspects of past experience return to the client’s awareness to be resolved in the here and now of present time.

POTENTIAL

The potential for healing in the practice of BCST is astonishingly wide ranging. Not only are physical trauma and illness ameliorated by BCST, but the forces

of the Breath of Life, or biodynamic energy, can also directly impact and transform our emotional, psychological, and even spiritual health. **m&b**

Notes

1. W. G. Sutherland, *Contributions of Thought*, 2nd ed. eds. Adah Strand Sutherland and Anne Wales (Yakima, Washington: Sutherland Cranial Teaching Foundation, 1998): 146.
2. W. G. Sutherland, *Teachings in The Science of Osteopathy*, ed. Anne Wales (Sutherland Cranial Teaching Foundation, 1990).
3. W. G. Sutherland, *Contributions of Thought*, 2nd ed.
4. *Osteopathy in the Cranial Field*, ed. Harold Magoun (Sutherland Cranial Teaching Foundation, 1997): 15.
5. The five principles of biodynamic craniosacral therapy were first articulated in my article “Natural Fulcrums: Principles of Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy,” *The Cranial Wave* (Winter 2014): 26.
6. F. Sills, *Foundations in Craniosacral Biodynamics*, Vol. I (Berkeley: North Atlantic Press, 2011): 53.

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Scott Zamurut, RCST, is one of the longest tenured biodynamic craniosacral therapy teachers in North America and served as a founding board member of the Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy Association of North America (www.craniosacraltherapy.org). He offers foundation and advanced trainings in BCST at the Santa Fe School of Massage in New Mexico, where he also offers specialized trainings in pre- and perinatal education.