

Craniosacral therapist Amal Alaoui helps clients meet stress head-on

Melissa Thomas* was skeptical when she first went to see London-based craniosacral therapist and homeopath Amal Alaoui in 2012, but eight years later she is still a regular client and credits Amal with helping her to cope with her incredibly stressful job as a child safeguarding nurse and all the other life stresses she has to manage as a woman in her 50s—going through menopause, caring for elderly parents and dealing with her children leaving home for university.

Melissa had never really considered stress as something she needed to seek help for. But when an osteopath she was seeing suggested that her chronic neck pain may be related to stress, it made perfect sense to her.

"I've had arthritis in my neck for years," says Melissa. "There are times when it would flare up and I'd get painful spasms. The osteopath said Amal may be able to help by relieving stress."

Although she had been unimpressed with a natural practitioner she had seen in the past, Melissa knew it was going to be an altogether different experience after meeting with Amal. "She's very intuitive," says Melissa. "She was acutely aware of what I was feeling, physically and mentally."

As with all of Amal's clients, Melissa's 90-minute consultation began with Amal taking a full medical history and listening to what Melissa felt she needed help with most. "I was experiencing bullying at work at the time and was extremely stressed by the whole thing," Melissa recalls.

Amal then used that information to prescribe specific homeopathic remedies—not just based on a particular symptom but on a constitutional basis, which means looking at the person as a whole. Pulsatilla and Aurum are two of the remedies Amal prescribed for Melissa, but it would vary each time she saw her depending on what she believed was needed at that moment.

Amal then moved to the hands-on part of her therapy: craniosacral therapy,

a form of bodywork that focuses on the craniosacral system, which encompasses the structures of the central nervous system including the skull, cranial sutures (fibrous joints connecting the bones of the skull), cerebrospinal fluid, and the membranes of the brain and the spinal cord.

For each session, Amal would have Melissa lie down fully clothed on her treatment couch while she placed her hands under her neck and lower back with a very gentle touch. She moved her hands along Melissa's spine, sometimes up to her head, and talked through what she was feeling as she worked. When she found an area of restriction or tightness, she would hold her hands in one place for 15 minutes or so.

Melissa remembers Amal pointing out that her upper body was extremely tense, so this is one area she focused on. "I found it fascinating," says Melissa. "I could notice my body physically react to what she was doing."



Amal Alaoui

Most clients don't see her specifically for stress, but Amal sees it at the root of many other complaints, such as sleep problems, skin flare-ups, poor digestion and chronic pain

After the craniosacral therapy, Melissa says she felt much lighter—as if a weight had been lifted from her mind and body—and more relaxed. "It's a bit like taking a massive deep breath," she explains.

Melissa left this session feeling "a whole heap better" and much more able to cope with the work stress she was dealing with at the time. She began seeing Amal on a weekly basis and soon noticed an improvement in her neck pain as well as some of the other symptoms she had been experiencing, such as insomnia.

Feather-light touch

Stress manifesting in various ways is one of the main issues Amal Alaoui encounters in her practice. "Clients don't necessarily book appointments saying 'I'm severely stressed,'" says Amal. "It may show up as sleep problems, skin

flare-ups, poor digestion or for example. Stress can impact many levels."

Both craniosacral therapy, homeopathy, the modalities aim to strengthen the body she says, and combined therapy to reduce all kinds of stress and ultimately relieve symptoms.

Craniosacral therapy is a gentle system it targets is closely linked to the central nervous system (CNS) of the brain and spinal cord. The CNS controls most functions of the body and mind. Craniosacral therapy is designed to enhance the function of the CNS by releasing restrictions in tissues that surround it, part of the craniosacral system.

According to craniosacral therapist Gez Lamb, everyday stresses and strain body tissues to tighten and restrict the craniosacral system, which forms around the brain and spinal cord. This can affect healthy functioning of the

The goal of craniosacral therapy is to release these restrictions using a touch called "palpation"—more than 5 grams in weight to a nickel or 20-pence coin to normalize the environment of the brain and spinal cord.¹

Integral to this is the cerebrospinal fluid, the liquid surrounding the brain and spinal cord, which circulates through the body through the

"With my hands, I'm feeling the ease of motion of this fluid and areas of 'stuckness,'" says Amal. "You need to unravel it to get the craniosacral system functioning properly again."

In fact, scientific studies show that treating fascia leads to decreased muscle tension and increased parasympathetic nervous system response and "vagal tone."² Higher vagal tone, which refers to the activity of the vagus nerve, the longest nerve in the body and a key player in the parasympathetic nervous system (that "rest and digest" system), means that your body can relax faster after stress.

Working to improve the craniosacral system, says Gez, which he describes as "a rhythmic tide you can feel that flows from head to tail and back again," will ultimately improve nerve pathways and

down, we blink less—all those things that start to take you away from that feeling of stress."

Amal commonly starts from the feet area to "ground" a person, then works from the lower spine to soften the spinal area and the fascia around that area.

Indeed, fascia—the protein-based fibrous tissue that envelops every muscle, bone, organ, ligament, tendon, nerve and vein in the body—is crucial to craniosacral therapy. According to craniosacral osteopath Gez Lamb, who is trained in both craniosacral therapy and osteopathy, a healthy fascia is essential for a healthy body.

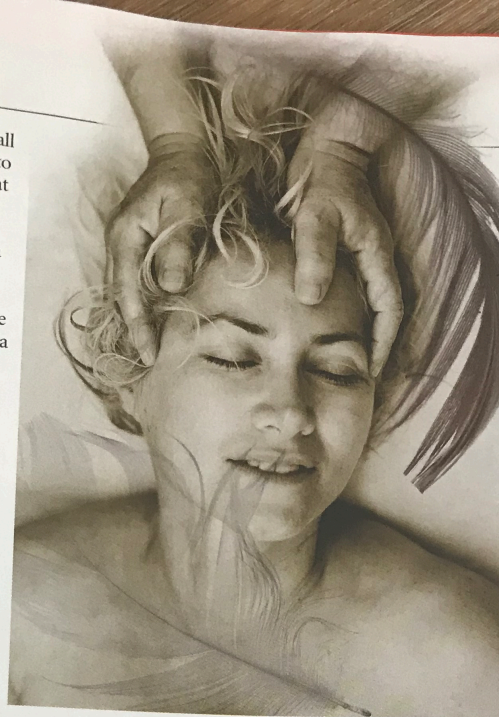
"Fascia is kind of like cling film," says Gez. "If you imagine it wrapped really tightly around your whole body, you're going to have restrictions in mobility." This is common in people suffering from prolonged stress, he says.

Typically, it may show up as tightness in the neck area, the most vulnerable part of the spine, but after years of stress, patterns of restriction can present all over the body.

"To release the fascia is to release an enormous amount of tension," he says. "You need to unravel it to get the craniosacral system functioning properly again."

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Craniosacral therapy up close

Originating from the work of osteopath William Sutherland in the early 1900s and developed in the 1970s and '80s by osteopathic physician John E. Upledger, craniosacral therapy focuses on the craniosacral system, comprising the membranes, fluid and bones that surround the brain and spinal cord.

The craniosacral rhythm that therapists work with is measurable via magnetic resonance imaging and other imaging techniques, although Gez Lamb notes that "no one knows where it comes from." Some refer to it as the body's inherent life force.

According to Gez, the rhythm can be felt as a subtle motion almost like a tide through the bone. "When you first train, you're feeling for it with your hands," says Gez. "But as the years go on, you tune into the craniosacral rhythm with your whole sensory experience."

Several scientific studies on craniosacral therapy show that it can be beneficial for a number of conditions, especially chronic pain. In one such study, craniosacral therapy was put to the test against a sham therapy and found to significantly improve pain intensity as well as functional disability, quality of life and anxiety.¹

And in a recent pooled analysis of randomized controlled trials (the gold standard for clinical studies), researchers reported "significant and robust effects of [craniosacral therapy] on pain and function, which are not exclusively explainable by placebo responses."²

The therapy has also been found to alleviate pain, anxiety and depression in people with fibromyalgia,³ and to have a positive effect on the activity of the autonomic nervous system, which controls the body's response to stress.⁴

According to the Upledger Institute, a leading craniosacral therapy educational center, the therapy is also beneficial for chronic fatigue, learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), post-traumatic stress disorder and more.

hormonal processes involved in the stress response. "If you can calm down those pathways and processes," he says, "you can calm down stress."

Sure enough, patients receiving craniosacral therapy have reported feelings of deep relaxation and release and a reduction in anxiety as well as pain and muscle tension.¹

But both Gez and Amal point out that craniosacral therapy is not about treating specific conditions or states—it's a holistic therapy designed to help bring a person back in balance, and that will ultimately have a healing effect on both mind and body.

As Gez puts it, "Everything seems to improve when you improve the craniosacral system."

Joanna Evans

*Name has been changed at the interviewee's request

Resources

Amal Alaoui:
www.amalremedy.co.uk

Gez Lamb:
www.osteopathnorthwood.co.uk

Craniosacral Therapy Association:
www.craniosacral.co.uk

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