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Palpating the Craniosacral Rhythm

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Palpation is the art of using touch to examine the body and explore the structures beneath the skin - their forms, movements and relationships to each other. Through palpation, you can discover the normal or abnormal function of an organ; the mobility of a joint with its muscular, ligamentous and tendinous attachments; the motion of one bone compared to another; and the flow of body fluids. You can even use palpation to monitor the electromagnetic field surrounding the body.

The practice of CranioSacral Therapy relies on your ability to use sensitive palpation to feel the craniosacral rhythm - the subtle pulsation of the craniosacral system as cerebrospinal fluid circulates through it in a dynamic loop. While this skill is taught at CranioSacral Therapy workshops, you can get an idea of what the craniosacral rhythm feels like by palpating your own.

First, you'll need to "calibrate" your touch to 5 grams. You can do this by placing a nickel somewhere on your body, such as your forearm, and then placing your hand next to the nickel. As you do this, lighten your touch until it feels comparable to the weight of the nickel. You also can imagine gently placing your hand on a newborn's face, and then touch your body that lightly. Notice how much softer this touch is than the way most people typically touch or palpate.

Once you're comfortable with your ability to touch with 5 grams of pressure, you can practice palpating the craniosacral rhythm. To do this, simply rest your elbows on a table and lightly place your hands on either side of your head so the full surfaces of your palms and fingers are gently in contact with your head. You can now use that very light, 5-gram touch to feel the movement produced by the circulation of cerebrospinal fluid in the craniosacral system.

Just like a water balloon expands and contracts if the fluid within it increases or decreases, the membranes of the craniosacral system expand and contract ever so slightly in response to the fluid changes within the system. You can feel this movement as the system softly pushes against your relaxed hands when it's expanding and then pulls away from them when it's contracting. The movement is extremely subtle, so if your touch is too heavy it's more difficult to feel.

Once you practice enough to become aware of the craniosacral rhythm, you can begin to notice the characteristics of that movement. Is it symmetrical and balanced? Is it big and strong? Is it slight and weak? Observe whatever you can at the head, and then move your hands to another location, perhaps the thighs, and repeat the process. Palpate the subtle movement and notice its characteristics. Compare the rhythm at the thighs with the rhythm at the head, and then continue that process on other areas.

Observing the differences in the craniosacral rhythm on various parts of the body gives you key information to help you locate areas of restricted tissue. Like a dry sponge placed in a pool of water, noninvasive palpation allows you to absorb an enormous amount of information so you can more effectively help the tissues release -enabling the body to self-correct on a multitude of levels.
