

Physical Medicine: A Hand in Healing

Physical Medicine is a catch-all phrase for the following therapeutic modalities: Spinal Manipulation, Bowen Therapy, Hydrotherapy, Massage Therapy and Craniosacral Therapy. These all involve a hands-on approach to healing, and range from light touch to short amplitude, high velocity adjustment. Each therapy is excellent for treating specific conditions and range in efficacy from short term to long term results.

Before any therapy is performed, an orthopaedic assessment is done to determine whether the problem arises from soft tissue or bone. Misalignment of spinal bones, or vertebrae, is further determined via X-Ray and then a diagnosis is reported about the type of condition found. The treatment in Spinal Manipulation involves the short-amplitude, high-velocity adjustment, where hand placement is exact and precise movements are carried out to bring the vertebrae back into alignment. When the assessment, diagnosis and treatment are done correctly this therapy typically brings instant relief for the client. Sometimes repeated adjustments are needed due to chronic mal-position of the vertebrae, but when combined with stretching and strengthening exercises for the specific muscles, the need for repeated adjustments will decrease.

Soft tissue problems, such as nerve entrapment, muscle spasm, chronic muscle tension, and numbness are often treated using Craniosacral, Bowen, Massage, or Hydrotherapy. Other forms of physical therapies can involve ultrasound or TENS devices, laser therapy, or magnets. Each of these are non-invasive and range from light touch in Craniosacral, Bowen and Massage therapy, to active release and progressive muscle relaxation using biofeedback devices in Massage therapy. Soft tissue problems also have an energetic etiology and can be caused from emotional factors. Craniosacral and Massage therapy are both effective in aiding the release of these tissues from their emotional constraints.

Hydrotherapy is best used with all physical ailments and is effective in acute and chronic conditions. It is different from the other therapies in that it utilizes alternating water temperatures to create a change in the blood circulation. It is the application of water in any form, either externally or internally, in the treatment of disease and maintenance of health. Based on the duration of the temperature and the actual water temperature, a warmer temperature will cause vasodilation and the cooler temperatures will cause vasoconstriction. For example, changing the temperature of the water in which a hand or foot is immersed from cold to hot will cause the respective vasodilation. Blood flow to the area is increased. The subsequent change in temperature to cold will cause vasoconstriction, and blood flow to the area decreases. The changing temperatures create a flushing effect in the tissue, thereby aiding the flow of nutrients for healing and the removal of metabolic waste products.

A practical application of hydrotherapy that I have employed during my years of running is to finish my run with a few minutes of cold water on my legs. Depending on the location and season, I have stood in the glacial waters of the Campbell River, the ocean water in the Gaspe Peninsula, or simply the water coming from the garden hose or shower. I give each leg a three-minute soak in the cold water and then a few minutes to warm up away from the cold, and then I repeat the process three times through. It has consistently aided the removal of lactic acid, prevented inflammation in my joints and muscles, and decreased muscle soreness after workouts.