

8 Tips to Enhancing Your CST Experience

BY KATE MACKINNON
PT | CST-D



8 Tips to Enhancing Your CST Experience

To enhance your CST sessions, it is important to set your session time as something that's just for you. You don't want to be answering a text or phone call during your time on the table! I've had people rush late into my office, asking to cut the session short so they can get to a meeting. Although I'm happy to accommodate a tight schedule, I feel that if you do this, you are definitely short-changing yourself.

Leave yourself a little time after your session to ground and reorient yourself before popping right back into your busy life, and use grounding practices to help you deepen and lengthen the changes. I've watched some people walk out my office door and go right back into their old holding patterns . . . I want you to keep your gains! Remember there are many ways to enhance your session - these 8 tips will point you in the right direction.



1. Breathing

Throughout CST sessions I'll observe my clients' breathing patterns, which gives me an indication of how relaxed they are (or not!). I also pay attention to my own breath to ensure that I'm staying relaxed and present. It's common to take in a big breath and sigh during sessions; these breaths often coincide with the tissues' letting go of a holding pattern. So let them happen as you feel them arise.

Sometimes, breath has a story all its own. For example, I had a client who started taking shallow, rapid breaths midway through a session. When I checked in with her to make sure she wasn't feeling overwhelmed, she said that she was familiar with this breathing pattern. It seems that when she got anxious, her breathing changed, she'd feel really warm, and then she'd usually burst into tears and spiral into a feeling of overwhelm; she was surprised that she was breathing this way now, though, since she felt relaxed on the table. I encouraged her to stay with those short breaths, as I could feel the heat her body was creating help her tissues start to open and relax. It was fascinating to us both that her body chose that breathing pattern to give her tissues the activation they needed to let go of their holding.

There are times when you might experience discomfort as your therapist works on an area that is tightly held. One common place is the base of the neck, where we have a thick layer of muscle that's often tight, protecting that vulnerable spot. The technique used to open it often gives a feeling people describe as "intense" or "a good pain." When this happens, I encourage clients to pay particular attention to their exhales, inviting their bodies to let

It's common to take in a big breath and sigh during sessions; these breaths often coincide with the tissues' letting go of a holding pattern.



go of whatever tension they no longer need. Some clients feel that it's suddenly easier to breathe during their sessions, particularly through their diaphragms. They can feel the air moving through their bodies from the inside. This can be a really exciting new sensation! I encourage them to take careful note of this change and then spend some time at home afterward observing their breathing, paying attention to the feeling of their breath moving. Breath-awareness practices, such as pranayama in yoga, are also useful both on the table and after. I've personally found it useful in my own sessions!

2. Movement

I often feel the need to move when I receive CST, and I follow that impulse, knowing that my therapist will support me as I do. Following a movement is one way I access my inner wisdom; it helps me deepen my understanding of what I'm processing, and shows me how to let it go. I encourage you to allow your body to move as it wants to. You may never feel an impulse to move, or you may be like me, at the far end of the spectrum in terms of being a kinesthetic person—most of my own sessions involve some kind of movement on the table. Either way, the sessions are just as effective.

Moving during CST can make you feel vulnerable, but I encourage you to follow the impulse if it arises and you feel safe. You are in control, and you always have the choice to stop! On a practical note, remember that the tables are narrow; if you find yourself precariously close to the edge, move back to a safe place in the middle of the table and you will drop back into your session again.

Moving in new ways, ways that aren't our habitual patterns, can create profound change.

Moving is a good way of continuing your process after a session, as well. A practice called continuum movement, founded by Emilie Conrad, is very helpful in enhancing your ability to find and follow your body's impulses. Continuum movement explores how bodies move when there are no demands placed on them. You use breath and sounds to vibrate through tissue and loosen restrictions, or "soften the inhibitors." Then the body can move as it wants, rather than having to move to perform a task. Moving in new ways, ways that aren't our habitual patterns, can create profound change.

I've always been able to release whatever's going on for me most easily in water. I've experienced some incredible CST sessions in it, but I've also had fantastic releases doing my regular workout in the pool or just simply moving and playing in water. On land, yoga is good method for processing after CST work, especially a home practice. That way, you can choose poses that feel right and stay in them as long as you want. After a session, when I go into my quiet time at home, I'll continue to follow any spontaneous impulses I have to move and see where they take me, paying attention so I notice when things feel complete.

During my sessions with clients who practice yoga, when we feel areas of the body opening up, we will discuss the yoga poses that address the same muscle group. For example, if we feel the hip adductors (the muscles on the inside of the thigh) open, we discuss a "seated forward fold." I ask them to pay attention to their yoga practice afterward, and they commonly describe to me later how much more deeply they can go into the pose. One client said, "I could not believe the difference in my adductor in my next yoga class. I felt no holding or tightness, when before I always felt like it might snap in a seated forward fold." In the quiet time after a CST session, the yoga pose called viparita karani is very helpful to most people. In this position, you simply lie on your back with your legs resting up on the wall in front of you.

I encourage you to find a movement practice that supports your well-being. Practices such as tai chi and Pilates are great ways to continue opening up and stabilizing the changes that happen in a CST session. Simply taking a relaxing walk after a session can also be a great way to integrate the work. There may be some open space nearby where you can hike or sit in the peace and quiet of the outdoors. You can take a nice stroll around your neighborhood or simply move slowly through your backyard.



Viparita karani yoga pose



3. Sound

Similar to the feeling of wanting to move your body, you may have the impulse to make a sound at some point during your CST session. It can take courage to do so, especially in front of somebody else! Just know that your therapist will support you in whatever you choose to do. Similar to the feeling of wanting to move your body, you may have the impulse to make a sound at some point during your CST session. It can take courage to do so, especially in front of somebody else! Just know that your therapist will support you in whatever you choose to do. I'll often make these sounds along with my clients, to help alleviate any embarrassment they might feel. The kind of sound I've found most helpful is one that sounds like "ohm" or "vooom," but any sound that comes to you is fine. Sounds create a vibration you can feel in your body, creating openness and helping bring a sense of calm. They're particularly useful when you're feeling overwhelmed.

Words may come to you that you'll feel the need to say out loud. This can happen when working anywhere in the body, but I've noticed it most often when opening

tissues in the throat and mouth. Sometimes a song may spontaneously come into your head, and it'll feel good to sing it or have it sung to you. While not all therapists can carry a tune (one of those therapists being me), we're usually pretty game to try! I've even participated in multihands work where we all sang to our client upon request. I usually have quiet, unobtrusive music playing in my office. You may consider bringing in your own music to therapy as well. One of my clients gave me a CD that plays a mantra from her particular spiritual practice, which I play during her sessions.

Even if you don't use sound during your session, you may find it helpful afterward. Whether you use nonsense sounds or whole words, loudly or softly, the privacy of the car is a good place to make noise! I've found singing along to kirtan CDs (a call-and-response form of singing) particularly helpful after a mouth-work session. One client told me that after a session in which we had focused on opening her neck and throat, she noticed much greater ease in her body at choir practice the following week. She felt the newfound opening in her throat brought even more enjoyment to her singing, and she was able to maintain this spaciousness through her regular rehearsals.

4. Imagery

A scene or picture often comes to clients during their sessions that helps them understand what they're working with. If an image appears for you, it can be helpful to regularly check in with it afterward. As an example, consider a client of mine who had intense bladder pain. When I asked her if there was anything we could bring into her bladder that would help with its healing process—a color, temperature, or any other quality—she said, “A cool blue gel.” We visualized bringing this into her body, and she had no pain in her bladder or urethra at the end of the session. Now, as part of her daily practice, she continues to envision this gel, usually as she lies in bed at night before going to sleep.



This method of using our imagination is a way of accessing our intuitive wisdom. The first few times can feel awkward, and you may feel some self-doubt. But there is valuable information to be gained from engaging with your unique inner imagery.

A good friend shared with me some of what she saw in one of her most memorable and powerful sessions: “I saw the image of a huge keychain, with hundreds of keys—I realized that I was trying to find the right key for every situation, to make myself ‘fit.’ I then met one of my guides, who taught me to dance; subsequently, the keys transformed into a tambourine, which I danced with, feeling a sense of fitting in just as I am, and celebrating that. Now whenever I see that keychain in my mind’s eye, I realize I’m trying to fit in or fix a situation, and I’m reminded that I simply need to be myself.”

5. Dreams



Dreams can be seen as a way to access your unconscious mind, and many believe that you can find meaning and solutions in them. Clients often report that symptoms and symptom-related dreams show up just before a session, as if the body is highlighting what needs to be worked on.

I have no training in interpreting dreams, but many times I've had people describe theirs to me during a session. Fortunately, I haven't

needed to offer an analysis, as they've been able to find their own answers as the session unfolds.

During one, a client came in and described to me the dream she'd had the night before, in which a tigress had appeared. We began the session at her right pelvis, and she asked what color the chakra was in that area. When I told her it was orange, she said, “This is what the tigress was showing me. It's where I have fear. When I was terrified of opening up my own company 20 years ago, I had my right ovary removed; and now I'm afraid to take my next career step. The tigress is a sign for me to have courage.”

The information was streaming out of her. As she talked, I noticed her right sacroiliac

You may gain insight from reading or listening to stories, too. One author I frequently recommend is Clarissa Pinkola Estés. Listening to her CDs can help you gain further insights into your CST sessions, and perhaps give you some “aha” moments!

You may also find connections to your own life issues through reading Joseph Campbell’s work on mythology, which includes many wonderful traditional stories and imagery from around the world.

7. Journaling

Some people love to write. But even if you don’t think of yourself as a writer, journaling can be helpful. Remember that it’s just for you, not for anyone else to read, and it’s a great way to express your thoughts, dreams, and emotions.

Journaling was not something that I was drawn to growing up, but I have learned to enjoy it and have found it very beneficial. You can write down descriptions of your



CST sessions, and often as you write, your understanding of your experience deepens. If you’ve done a lot of intense emotional work, your journal is a safe place to put it; you can read through it again when the emotions are not as raw and you can absorb

joint opening. There was a new sense of space in her pelvis, and I invited her to feel into that sensation. She left with a renewed sense of purpose, willing to take the next step in her career.

It's common to have deep, restorative sleep after CST, and to have interesting dreams. Write down any images you remember when you wake up. I've found it useful to go back and reread what I wrote a few weeks later; they always make a lot more sense to me than when I wrote them down, though I can't say why.

It's common to have deep, restorative sleep after CST, and to have interesting dreams.

6. Archetypes



Many people find there are themes underlying what comes up in their sessions that are also reflected in fairy tales and myths. Although the specifics of our situations may differ, all of us are often working on the same core issues! I listen to fairy tales with my children in the car, and I'm surprised by how much insight I continue to gain about my own life every time I listen to them.

more information. Some of my clients who journal regularly will access information during CST work that they later explore further with a talk therapist. Some people bring in their journal when they see me, because they like to write down information and impressions as soon as possible, before they forget.

You can also use writing to help formulate your intentions when you prepare for your CST sessions. The scope of your questions can be cast wide. Questions to consider include: What results would I like? Is there an area in my body that needs relief? What pattern of pain can I gain more insight into? Is there a reason my pain shows up at a particular time or place? Is this issue connected to a past event?

I always encourage people to take some quiet time with themselves after a session, to check in and notice any new sensations. This is great time to write down your experience, what you noticed, and any interesting thoughts that arose during the session. Your body is still actively working on a session for at least 24 hours afterward, so this reflective time is a way to capitalize on the process. You may find that writing helps your body to continue softening and releasing. It's not uncommon to experience new emotions and sensations as you write.

Your body is still actively working on a session for at least 24 hours afterward, so this reflective time is a way to capitalize on the process.

8. Drawing

If you're more inclined to draw than write, you can use that medium to help continue your process after CST. A clear image may come to you during your session, compelling you to draw it. Some clients see amazingly vivid colors during, and drawing or painting these colors is a way of continuing their process. Give yourself permission to follow your impulses.

Once, after seeing an image in a session, the impulse to draw came to me. I had to go out and buy a bunch of art supplies, because it's something I never do! Interestingly, I knew exactly what kind of oil pastels and paper I wanted. Drawing was an incredibly powerful process for me, and one that took me by surprise. It gave me a sense of being in charge of how I dealt with a childhood experience, when at the time I had no power. I even surprised myself with my artistic talents and the fact that I was able to successfully convey my imagery.