

Making Waves in Massage Therapy

Dolphin-Assisted Craniosacral Therapy

By Kate Mackinnon

“Welcome to the Grand Bahama,” my taxi driver said as I stepped out of the airport and into the warm, humid air. With that simple greeting, I knew I would feel at home on this island for the next four days. My temporary home was also the location of a bioaquatic class where I would be part of a small group learning how to use craniosacral therapy (CST) techniques in the water and how to support one another during dolphin-assisted craniosacral therapy (DACST).

As 16 of us sat in a circle awaiting that first day, questions tumbled through my mind: Is there anything *new* offered? How will this help *my* practice? How will this translate for me when I don't own a swimming pool or dolphin? My curiosity brought me here, but will it be worth it?

Quieting all the questions in my head, Kat Plasencio, one of the co-founders of Integrative Intentions International (III), the organization that runs the bioaquatic classes and DACST programs, welcomed us to the class. She explained how the next four days would be structured and gave us

some of the history of the organization. Plasencio explained how Dr. John E. Upledger, developer of CST, spent many years fostering his clinical experience in an aquatic environment with dolphins present. He observed and measured positive results such as pain reduction, increased ease of breathing, greater relaxation, reduced hypertonicity, enhanced strength and flexibility, and more restful sleep.

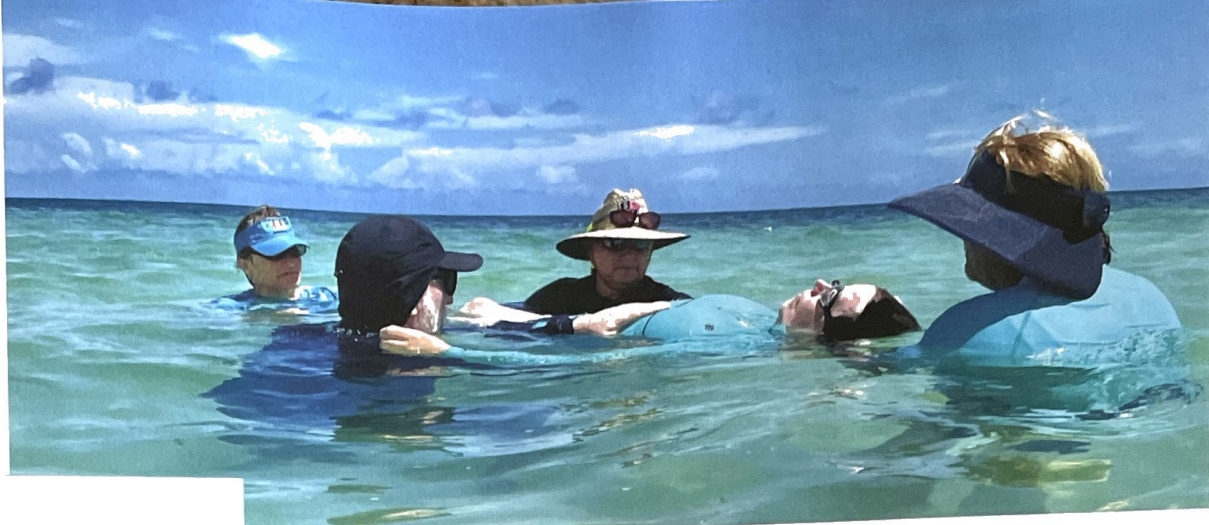
Dr. Upledger asked III co-founders Plasencio and Chas Perry to continue his bioaquatic CST work. In 2011, a cooperative relationship with the Upledger Institute International was agreed upon, and III has continued to steward the bioaquatics exploration classes and dolphin-assisted therapy programs. Plasencio also explained how the dolphin facility for this program was one of the top places in the world. The first dolphins were wild captures used in television and movies and rescued by the facility. They had remained there for over 20 years, had calves, and populated their pod. The dolphins are now free to come and go

during classes and therapy programs, which means they are not forced to participate. They are exceptionally well cared for and given the best food and provision of health care. They reside in a bay where the ocean water constantly refreshes itself, and the staff provides regular trips out to the open ocean, where the dolphins can follow and swim freely.

HOW THE PROGRAM CAN IMPROVE YOUR CLINICAL SKILLS

The DACST classes for Upledger-trained therapists are four days long, as are the programs for clients. Practitioners learn how to use CST techniques in the pool, ocean, and at the dolphin facility. A range of classes are offered, some





KEY POINT

Working in a bioaquatic class brings a completely different somatic experience to clients and practitioners. And skills learned can translate to table work on land.

requiring having taken one Upledger class, others up through advanced classes.

Clients receive treatment at the dolphin facility, where a therapist often supports them at the feet while the client floats on their back, though clients are supported in whatever way they request. In addition, the clients receive multi-hands CST on the treatment table and/or in the pool.

The dolphins facilitate treatment through the sounds they make, the wave patterns they create, and touch. They can also transmit ultrasound waves, which humans can't track easily.

During my time in the Bahamas at this bioaquatic exploration class, I learned how DACST could help improve my everyday work with clients. Here are seven ways the class can benefit your practice.

1. Working in Water

Bioaquatic classes teach new techniques and how to apply CST in the water. Observing changes in shape and tension patterns in the body becomes easier since water magnifies these changes. Any slight change or movement of the body is reflected in the water. If you look to the left when floating on your back without moving any other part of your body, including your neck, your body will turn left. Also, water is liberating—you can shout, punch, or scream and process intense emotions in water without alarming or hurting anyone.

The environment of the water allows you to move with ease through ideas, issues, and difficult memories. The body frees up to move and position itself in ways that are not possible on land. Many different speeds of movement are made possible in water—from big, fast movements to complete stillness and support. Spinning quickly may be helpful, and the therapists working with you can facilitate that movement. Alternatively, being compressed into different shapes and held still may be what is needed. It's common for someone to form a fetal position and crave compression in water; the therapists can provide that from 360 degrees.

The saltwater of the ocean makes bodies more buoyant, allowing you to physically let go of tension patterns, along with the support of the therapists. The motion of the waves can be soothing and sometimes provide the agitation needed to bring forward something new to work through.

Facilitating all these possibilities requires an understanding of how to use the properties of water, keen observation, and adapting your therapeutic touch.

2. Dolphins

DACST sessions are a multisensory experience. Not only do you experience the cool touch of the water, but the dolphins' clicks, whistles, and squeaks envelop you.

During one of my sessions, I was floating on my back, supported by my colleague at my ankles, and I became aware of a wave pattern the dolphins created. My

body responded with a gentle undulation from my head down to my pelvis, but it didn't continue to my legs. Right when I thought I would like more presence in my legs to access the undulation, a dolphin swam underneath my right leg, causing it to feel very alive and vibrant.

After the dolphin left, I thought, "I want that for my left leg. Can I do it myself? Will my left leg copy my right leg?" Then, a dolphin swam underneath my left leg, giving it the same response of being alive and vibrant. Suddenly, I could feel the undulation all the way through my body. I was in awe of the experience, and it was a clear demonstration of the power of my thoughts. That change in how my legs felt stayed with me six months later, making it easier to feel steady and more grounded.

I found in these sessions that the dolphins became the primary therapist, and the therapist became the support.

3. Getting Your Own Treatment

In all of Upledger's CST classes, the instructors remind students that receiving CST regularly is essential to improving their effectiveness. This basic tenet is true for all forms of bodywork. A healed healer is an ideal aspiration for us all. Additionally, we learn clinically from how the touch feels, a vital component to refining our skills. On each of the four days during my bioaquatic class, there was time to treat one another in the different environments: the ocean, the

Client Reflections

During Kate Mackinnon's bioaquatic class, two clients shared their experiences and results from DACST.

Anna's Experience

Anna, an electrician who had severe repetitive strain injuries to her neck and arms from her work, said, "Even after many surgeries and different types of bodywork, I continue to be in constant extreme pain, unable to sit, lie, or be in one place for any length of time. I wake every hour needing a change of position, and I don't feel rested in the morning. After injuring my shoulder, I have horrible debilitating headaches that can make me throw up."

On the third day of class, Anna said, "The dolphins are awesome, and I feel like they are healing my injuries, but it's hard to say exactly how. I know that as the dolphins move all around me, they help my body move how it needs to. The dolphins also spent time touching my head, neck, and shoulders. The whole experience is so meditative. It feeds my soul."

At the end of her second DACST program, Anna's face looked brighter, more open, and relaxed, as was her voice. "The biggest change for me is that my body feels much less compressed," she said. "I feel like my time in the water with the dolphins helped me take up the room I'm supposed to. I can now sleep through the night and I no longer experience headaches."

Suzanne's Journey

Suzanne, an experienced craniosacral therapist, had a more unusual perspective of having previously been a primary therapist on DACST programs.

She shared her experiences with the dolphins as a client. "I have a cerebellar meningioma, which causes a variety of motor disturbances and neurological issues. I am seeking improvements in my daily activities, such as going up and down the stairs more easily," she said.

"When I laid back in the water with my therapist gently supporting my feet, I felt as if there were a team of dolphins in my head with an astounding cacophony of noise in the water. It was very high energy with so many variations of sounds, trills, and buzzes in the water. Another surprise was how aware I was of the dolphins scanning me and deciding where to touch me or send sounds through me. I felt like my body was a part of theirs, like I was included in their own body image.

"Every day, I've had new improvements," Suzanne said. "My dynamic balance improved dramatically. On day one, the stairs required intense concentration for me. I had to hold on to the railing and watch my feet while my companions guarded me from behind. Today, I can go up and down stairs without constantly watching my feet for placement and use the railing only occasionally without anyone guarding me from behind. My word retrieval, cadence, and speech organization during social interactions improved by 50 percent over the four days."

Suzanne's MRIs of the cerebellar tumor have shown no progression or growth for four years, and under the doctor's supervision, she decreased her medication. Suzanne returned to driving and working.



pool, the dolphin facility, and the treatment table. Having such different environments for treatment in a group setting brought forward new pieces within us to be healed. This healing process has the ability to be a ripple effect of change in our relationships, families, friends, and communities.

4. Value of Multi-Hand Settings

A multi-hand setting where two or more therapists work together always creates new learning for the therapists. A primary therapist is designated for each treatment. In class, their role is to lead and coordinate the other therapists and influences. There is a sharing between therapists—what we've learned from working with our clients, and our own lived experiences. It may be a refinement of touch, a way of dialoguing, or the way therapists connect through the client on the table or in the water that clarifies something new for us.

Multi-hand treatments in the water and with dolphins increase our skills because of the novel experiences I previously described in *Working in Water*. When you participate as a therapist in the four-day DACST program, you work with clients presenting with various issues, some of which may be new to you. The therapists working with clients change daily, providing a great opportunity to increase your knowledge and for your hands to become more educated. There are often five or more clients in the treatment room or pool, each with three or more therapists

I found in these sessions that the dolphins became the primary therapist, and the therapist became the support.

creating a group field in which there is an amplification of support for changes to occur. In this environment, everyone learns and experiences something new.

5. Added Value of Nature

In your regular land-bound treatment rooms, you're used to tracking changes through your hands, dialogue, and outside noises. However, in water, you have the addition of the group environment, dolphins, and the natural environment.

The weather in the Bahamas can change dramatically from blue skies and sunshine to thunder and lightning with a downpour of rain. With the change in weather, the waves can alter in amplitude and direction, all influencing a treatment session. As my colleague Staci succinctly said, "The water and environment around me are therapists themselves."

From my experience, when we practice CST in the ocean, pool, and dolphin facility, we can explore our interconnectedness.

We become aware of the fish, we hear the crackling sounds from the shrimp, we see the birds flying overhead, we feel the rhythmic swaying of the sea grass.

A bonus to being a therapist in these programs can be developing a love for being in the water. Staci was terrified of the ocean and any sea life that lived in it before she took her first class. Being supported by her colleagues in the water, the distraction of seeing the dolphins having fun, and the

repetition of being in the water lowered her fear. She told me recently that she is now so comfortable in water she goes paddleboarding on a lake near her home.

6. Play

In these programs, there are clients who have significant health issues, and as therapists, this can feel weighty and serious. The dolphins are a wonderful antidote, as they bring an element of play. In my class, everyone would smile as soon as the dolphins emerged from the water. During sessions, laughter is a key element—especially with children. The III instructors have been involved in these programs for over 20 years, and the dolphins clearly recognize them. Whenever the dolphins swam up to them, they seemed to say, "Come, let's go and play."

7. Changing Your Perspective

In my bioaquatic class, I benefited from sharing our experiences during the daily circle time facilitated by the instructors. The mere act of listening to the variety of experiences over the four days opened each participant to new viewpoints. Just about everyone came away with an expansion of their perspective and increased understanding of "neutral." Ideally, as therapists, we can hold a neutrality where our views and thoughts create the least amount of influence on our client's process.

WHAT WE TAKE HOME WITH US

Every therapist I have spoken with who completed a bioaquatic class with DACST has found that they returned to their clinical practice with greater skills and now see enhanced results with their clients. My colleague Suzanne says her thought process is now different during

her "landlocked" sessions. She thinks, "What would a dolphin do with this? Where might they touch? What vibrations or noises would they use?" She finds that this creates a useful shift for her clients.

By the end of the bioaquatic class, I recognized that I had not only learned a lot clinically, but I had also changed through the healing work the dolphins and my colleagues facilitated. Over the years, I have gone on to take and repeat bioaquatic classes and participate as a therapist in the four-day DACST programs. I know the classes and programs are worth it. Every time I return home from time with the dolphins, my clients say, "That was the most powerful session I have had with you!" **m&b**

G Kate Mackinnon is a healing arts practitioner diplomate certified in craniosacral therapy and brings decades of experience in mainstream and complementary medicine. She authored *From My Hands and Heart: Achieving Health and Balance with CranioSacral Therapy* with a foreword from Wayne Dyer and co-authored *Elements of a Successful Therapeutic Business*. Find out more at www.kmackinnon.com. To find out more about the classes and programs, go to IntegrativeIntentions.com.



LISTEN TO THE ABMP PODCAST
"DOLPHIN-ASSISTED
CRANIOSACRAL THERAPY WITH
KATE MACKINNON"