

CERTIFIED CERVICOTHORACIC SPECIALIST

Course Syllabus

Advanced clinical reasoning, safety screening, differential examination, and specialist-level management of cervicothoracic conditions

Course Overview

The Certified Cervicothoracic Specialist Course is an 8-week hybrid, specialist-level course designed to help clinicians move beyond routine orthopedic neck and thoracic pain management and make stronger decisions in complex cervicothoracic cases. Cervicothoracic patients rarely present in clean categories: neck pain, thoracic pain, arm symptoms, headaches, dizziness, TMJ/TMD-related complaints, and aging-spine presentations can overlap; safety considerations may be subtle; and intervention selection often requires careful risk-benefit reasoning. This course trains participants to synthesize the subjective examination, symptom behavior, neurologic and safety screening, regional examination, functional testing, reassessment, and evidence-informed treatment strategies into a clear plan of care.

Course emphasis

This is not a protocol course, and it is not a general review of neck or thoracic pain. It is an advanced reasoning and skill-development course focused on the decisions clinicians make when the presentation is safety-sensitive, layered, uncertain, or not responding as expected. Participants will practice distinguishing diagnosis or classification from treatable drivers, selecting tests that answer a specific question, matching intervention to the patient in front of them, and using reassessment to progress, regress, modify, refer, escalate, or pivot.

Course Details

Item	Details
Course format	Asynchronous lectures and readings, four live virtual discussions, case-based reasoning activities, and an in-person weekend intensive.
Virtual didactic course	March 1 - April 25
Live virtual discussions	March 10, March 24, April 7, and April 21 from 7:00-9:00 PM EST
In-person weekend intensive	April 24-April 25
Location	1 New London Ave, Cranston, RI 02920
Course materials	All assigned materials are available through the learning management system, Talent. Participants are responsible for reviewing materials before live sessions.

Course Instructors

Role	Instructor
Primary Instructor	Michael Glassman, PT, DPT, OCS MGlassman@highbarhealth.com 774-254-7612
Faculty Adjunct	John Goodyear, PT, DPT, OCS JGoodyear@highbarhealth.com

Course Purpose

This course is designed to strengthen the clinician's ability to operate at a specialist level when evaluating and treating cervicothoracic conditions. By the end of the course, participants should be better prepared to:

- Develop a defensible working hypothesis from the subjective examination, symptom behavior, irritability, neurologic screening, vascular or systemic considerations, function, and context.
- Prioritize examination procedures based on the clinical question they answer rather than relying on a memorized checklist.
- Differentiate competing safety, mechanical, neurological, mobility, movement coordination, headache, dizziness, TMJ/TMD, aging-spine, and contextual drivers of cervicothoracic symptoms.
- Link examination findings to treatment decisions, reassessment markers, progression criteria, referral criteria, and clear next steps.
- Use anatomy, biomechanics, pathophysiology, pain science, safety screening, manual therapy risk-benefit reasoning, and evidence-informed practice as clinical context rather than rigid rules.
- Apply education, manual therapy, traction, neural mobility, therapeutic exercise, movement coordination training, graded exposure, TMJ/TMD management strategies, activity modification, and functional progression with greater specificity.
- Communicate clinical reasoning in a way that improves patient understanding, confidence, safety, and self-management.

Course Learning Objectives

1. Integrate relevant anatomy, biomechanics, pathophysiology, pain science, safety screening, and clinical practice guidelines into cervicothoracic management.
2. Use patient history and symptom behavior to generate, prioritize, and revise working hypotheses.
3. Select objective tests based on the clinical decision each test is meant to inform.
4. Differentiate common and complex cervicothoracic presentations, including neck pain, thoracic pain, radicular or arm symptoms, headache presentations, dizziness presentations, aging-spine conditions, TMJ/TMD presentations, mobility deficits, and movement coordination impairments.
5. Interpret imaging, structural findings, and diagnostic labels as clinical context rather than stand-alone explanations for pain or disability.
6. Apply evidence-informed treatment strategies with an appropriate match between suspected driver, safety profile, patient goals, irritability, and response to care.
7. Use reassessment to determine whether to continue, progress, regress, modify, refer, escalate, or abandon a working hypothesis.
8. Communicate advanced clinical reasoning clearly to patients, peers, and faculty.

Course Structure

The course is organized into four two-week learning blocks. Each block integrates assigned lectures, required readings, case-based discussion, clinical reasoning activities, and knowledge checks or assignments as directed by faculty.

Learning component	Primary role	Expected learner focus
Asynchronous lectures and readings	Build advanced foundation	Develop shared language, safety-screening principles, regional examination logic, evidence-informed concepts, and a framework for specialist-level reasoning.
Live virtual discussions	Pressure-test reasoning	Think through cases, explain decisions, support clinical priorities, and revise hypotheses as new information emerges.
Case-based activities and knowledge checks	Reinforce application	Use course concepts to make clinical decisions rather than simply recall definitions, classifications, or technique names.
In-person weekend intensive	Convert reasoning into skill	Practice examination, treatment selection, manual techniques, exercise progression, reassessment, safety-sensitive modification, and real-time clinical adaptation.

The weekend intensive is designed to help participants apply the reasoning process in a hands-on environment, where regional examination findings, manual techniques, exercise selection, safety considerations, symptom response, and reassessment all inform the next clinical decision.

Expected Preparation

- Complete assigned lectures and readings before each live virtual discussion.
- Come prepared to discuss cases, support clinical decisions, and consider alternative hypotheses.
- Participate actively in breakout groups and discussion activities.
- Practice clinical reasoning rather than simply naming diagnoses or classifications.
- State uncertainty, commit to a working hypothesis, and revise that hypothesis when new information does not fit.

Virtual Discussion Expectations

Live virtual discussions are designed for application, not lecture review. Participants should expect to work through cases, think out loud, support clinical priorities, and refine their plan as the case evolves.

- Identify a working hypothesis and the history features that support it.
- Interpret symptom behavior, associated symptoms, distal symptoms, irritability, functional limitations, and safety considerations.
- Explain how imaging, diagnostic labels, comorbidities, or contextual information influences reasoning without allowing it to replace the clinical exam.
- Choose a first test and explain why it earns priority.
- Link test findings to a treatment decision and a clear reassessment marker.
- Identify what would trigger a progression, regression, modification, referral, escalation, or pivot in the plan of care.

The expectation is not perfect certainty.

Specialist-level reasoning does not mean having the perfect answer immediately. It means making a reasonable decision, explaining your rationale, recognizing risk, listening to alternative viewpoints, and updating your thinking when the findings or patient response demand it.

Attendance and Make-Up Policy

Participants are expected to attend all live virtual discussions and the in-person weekend intensive.

If a participant is unable to attend a virtual discussion, they must review the recorded session and complete the assigned make-up reflection or activity within one week of the missed session.

To maintain course credit, participants may not miss more than one virtual discussion per management course unless otherwise approved by faculty.

Assessment and Completion Requirements

Assessment is intended to reinforce advanced clinical reasoning and application. Participants may be evaluated through open-book knowledge checks, case-based reasoning activities, reflective assignments, virtual discussion participation, lab participation, and practical application.

- Knowledge checks: Each block may include a short open-book/notes knowledge check covering assigned lectures and readings. Unless otherwise directed, knowledge checks are due by 11:59 PM EST on Sunday of the block's second week.
- Course completion: Participants must complete assigned asynchronous materials, attend required sessions or approved make-up work, participate in the weekend intensive, and demonstrate professional engagement.

Professional Expectations

- Engage respectfully with faculty and peers.
- Come prepared for discussion and lab activities.
- Use evidence and clinical reasoning to support decisions.
- Participate actively in breakout groups and lab practice.
- Remain open to feedback and clinical uncertainty.
- Communicate professionally during all course activities.

Course Materials

All course materials will be posted in Talent. Participants are responsible for downloading and reviewing assigned materials before each learning block, virtual discussion, and lab session.

Clinical Reasoning Standard

How strong performance is demonstrated

Strong specialist-level performance is demonstrated by forming a defensible working hypothesis, screening appropriately, choosing tests that matter, connecting findings to treatment and referral decisions, reassessing honestly, and changing course when the patient's presentation, response, or safety profile demands it. The strongest clinicians can explain what they think, why they think it, what would change their mind, and how the next step serves the patient.

Course Takeaway

By the end of this course, participants should not simply know more about cervicothoracic conditions. They should be better able to reason through uncertainty, identify what matters most, determine when safety changes the plan, choose interventions with intent, and adapt care based on meaningful reassessment. The goal is clearer rehab, better clinical decisions, and more confident specialist-level management of the cervicothoracic patients clinicians see every day.