

This thing called Rolfing

By Patricia Stepan

“I haven’t got time for the pain.” Carly Simon

Colloquialisms live in our bodies as well as in our language. From childhood we are taught to approach life from certain stances and attitudes. We are taught to ignore our instincts, the inherent wisdom that our bodies offer. The competitive spirit of our culture and times, athletics, careers, just the business of “stayin’ alive” encourage us to stop listening to the body’s signs and signals, resulting in failure to heed our wisdom and instincts. “If only I had listened to my gut...” often resounds too late.

As we shape our lives, our lives shape us. Our responses to life’s joys and challenges sculpt us. Our structures, contours and movements become a living map of who we are. As children we model our behavior and posture after our caregivers, creating stances and habits that identify yet often limit us. Unresolved trauma— accidents, injuries, threatening experiences, distort the body’s structure long after the trauma has passed.

In our busyness, we seldom consider how our habits are serving us. Frequently, it is the “gift” of pain and injury that brings our attention to these questions, offering the opportunity, at times the necessity to open and awaken new possibilities.

To be fully alive is to be responsive and aware, to have the capacity to learn and relearn. The body

is an ever-changing expression of our aliveness, or lack of it. Being highly adaptive, the body receives positive input as an opportunity to evolve and grow regardless of age. One such positive input is Rolfing.

Where Rolfing Fits In

Rolfing is a bodywork technique, developed by Dr. Ida P. Rolf, PhD. It is a form of connective tissue manipulation and movement education based on the “plastic,” changeable nature of the human body. It became Rolf’s life work to investigate the impact of the gravitational field and to pioneer this profound bodywork process called Structural Integration, the focus of which is to integrate the body toward a more user-friendly relationship with gravity.

Gravity? What Gravity?

Gravity is dynamic. It either pulls us down or supports and uplifts us, yet we remain largely unaware of its presence. The body is at its greatest ease and functions most effectively when its major segments— head, shoulders, thorax, pelvis and legs— are aligned around a vertical line, allowing gravity to do its job of supporting rather than wearing us down.

The key word is fascia, the connective tissue that defines the contour and shape of the body. Fascia is somewhat like a full-body leotard. The elastic nature of fascia responds to stress by shortening

and thickening, as the body’s attempt to protect against distortion and injury.

As the body rotates and shortens, the result is a feeling of misalignment or general discomfort. The misaligned body is at the mercy of gravity’s downward pull, increasing the effects and risks of aging, injury, stress and trauma.

The Rolfing Process

Structural Integration consists of a series of essentially 10 bodywork sessions. The Rolfer works and paces the series in collaboration with the client. Much like sculpting, the heat of the Rolfer’s hands utilizes the natural malleability of the fascia, following its flow and direction.

The Rolf series is guided by specific principles, carefully developed to systematically balance and integrate the body toward more effective alignment and function. Each session has an intention, and when one has completed the whole series, one has “been Rolfed.”

The Rolfer and client together work toward creating lift and length through the body’s center, balance between front/back and left/right sides, working toward supporting a pelvis that is horizontal, a stable trunk whose weight is supported directly over the pelvis, supporting the head above and easing the curves of the spine, and legs

and feet that properly support the pelvis.

Benefits

The specific goals of the series encourage the body toward its optimum state of support and balance. When well supported, the whole body becomes more resilient, vital, and energetic, moving with ease and lightness.

Does Rolfing Hurt?

Yes, sometimes, momentarily. The Rolfer's touch may meet pain that is held in the tissue. Working in the fascia allows pain to find a pathway through which to move, much like clearing a traffic jam. As the pathway clears, momentary discomfort subsides.

Who gets Rolfed?

People choose to get rolfed for many reasons: chronic physical conditions, such as headaches, backaches, joint pain results of accidents, injuries and surgeries. Some choose it for stress or emotional reasons. For some, a simple gut feeling tells them its the right thing to do.

Regardless of the reasons that bring folks to this work, they usually find it to be a beneficial and fascinating process.