

Rolfing: Structural Integration

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The Rolf method of Structural Integration (Rolfing) is a process of soft tissue manipulation and movement education, that uses the bodies own healing powers and its relationship to gravity as the tools for transformation. Rolfing has achieved many things to those that have experienced its power. For some it has helped them with that chronic back or neck pain that has plagued them for years. Others are touched by their remembered feelings of youthfulness and freedom. What is it about Rolfing that has this ability?

Rolfing was the creation of Dr Ida P. Rolf, evolving over a 50-year period. Starting with an early family illness Dr. Rolf began to study the work of the early Osteopaths, and the pioneers who brought yoga from the east. She was a researcher at heart having graduated with a Ph.D. in Biochemistry (1916). It was this strong foundation, willingness to learn, and down right curiosity that led to some fundamental additions to the understanding of human movement potential.

Dr. Rolf was initially drawn to what the Osteopaths saw as Structure defining Function within the body. What does this mean? Well, if for example you have a fall and injure your right leg, and as a result you limp for a few weeks, this limping will be altering the natural 'function' of your walking pattern. Your left hip may rise higher than your right to compensate. Your head may also thrust forward to balance your hips. Imagine if you were to just go on with this pattern and slowly over time it 'healed', in such a way that a new pattern was put in the place of your original. It is here that the problems arise.

It was during the early stages of her study that Dr. Rolf discovered the importance of connective tissue or more specifically fascia. Fascia is a substance that permeates all levels of the body. It en sheathes all muscles, and it tapers at the end of each muscle to become tendon; the structure that connects muscle to bone. It is via this network of interconnections that the fascial system draws its importance. Fascia which links all the segments of the muscular system when the body is healthy, may also reshape the body when it is pulled out of alignment. Visualize our example of the injured leg, as the patterns push the body out of alignment the fascia being elastic will take on the newfound limitations of movement and posture. This may create a new sense of what it may feel to be standing "up" or moving forward.

Gravity is the energy of relationship. In man, this relationship is a vertical line to the center of the earth. When flesh is in an orderly pattern around that line, the energy of gravity can resonate more uniformly. (Rolf, 1977)

Dr. Rolf recognized the importance of gravity as a major factor in Structural Integration. It is the mechanism that holds and/or displaces the body. Lets go back to our friend with the leg problem whose body has been suffering due to long-term

imbalance of the bodies segments. Imagine that each segment is like a building block stacked on top of the other, but with the blocks pushed off into different ends. With this wonky pile it would not take too much of a knock to throw the blocks tumbling to the ground. Now put the body segments of the head, torso, pelvis, and legs in the place of the blocks, and add to this the power to move as well as stand still; just consider how precarious the balance may be.

Rolfing works to address these misaligned patterns by bringing the body back to a sense of structural and functional normality. Rolfers use a combination of techniques to achieve the goals of a series. You may experience within the session a form of deep tissue massage known as 'Myofascial Release', accompanied with movement education; in which your practitioner may discuss with you options on how you may use your body in a more efficient and effortless manner. Rolfing is a process applied over ten sessions of varying lengths, and according to the needs of the client it may be spaced apart from one session a week to once per month. Each session has unique goals that Rolfers look towards achieving while taking into consideration the distinctive and varied needs of each individual. Sessions are progressive drawing on the last one and building towards the next.

By recognizing the fundamental structural needs of the person, Rolfers work towards aligning the body in gravity through a guided series of 10 sessions. The practitioner skilfully applies a combination of soft tissue techniques with movement integration practices. This education provides the client with the knowledge and awareness of what it means to stand tall, to walk with greater ease and to move with balance and flexibility.

This is the gospel of Rolfing: when the body is working appropriately the force of gravity can flow through. Then spontaneously the body heals itself. (Rolf. 1970)