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The Basics of Rolfing®

WHO SHOULD CONSIDER ROLFING?

According to Dr. Rolf, all bodies have some degree of disorder and compensation in their structure; therefore she believed that everyone should receive Rolfing structural integration. In fact, in her global vision, she imagined a more evolved and structurally efficient human species as a result of Rolfing. However, we realize that most potential clients need more compelling reasons to undergo this powerful transformative sequence of session. It is possible to divide those who come to Rolfing into two groups.

The first and largest group who should consider Rolfing are those who have a history of injury or trauma and notice that the effects of their often minor injuries are beginning to interfere with their everyday lives. In many cases these individuals have tried traditional medical treatments or exercise to reduce or counteract the long-term effects of old injuries with varying degrees of success. This group might include former and current athletes, musicians, performers or those engaged in physically demanding jobs who choose not to accept the notion that the quality of their lives must suffer simply because they are aging. In fact, all adults of any age who suffer from any limiting physical discomfort can absolutely benefit from Rolfing as long as the pains themselves are in the neuromuscular system and not signs of a nervous disorder or a deeper pathology. For most of us, Rolfing combined with appropriate movement therapy and exercise offers a long-lasting solution for connective tissue problems.

The second group are those who are on a spiritual path and who find that their physical limitations prevent them from attaining a higher level of spiritual or emotional peace. Frequently, many on this path assume that the body is something to be transcended rather than something to be honored and loved. For these individuals, Rolfing can serve as an educational resource, which allows them a more intimate and comfortable relationship with their physical body, which in turn allows a greater ability to experience greater serenity. Interestingly enough, as the body transforms physically it transforms on other planes as well, so that, while Rolfing's primary focus is the muscular and connective tissue system, it frequently has an even more dramatic effect in seemingly unrelated areas such as the spiritual. Exactly how this happens is still a matter of much debate and speculation. However, the results of the work were of much greater importance than the how or why for Dr. Rolf. The genius of Rolfing is that it can effect so many people in so many ways and continue to reveal new possibilities for such a rich diversity of individuals.

WHAT IS THE ROLFING TEN SERIES?

The hallmark of Rolfing Structural Integration is a standardized "recipe" known as the Ten Series, the goal of which is to systematically balance and optimize both the structure (shape) and function (movement) of the entire body over the course of ten Rolfing sessions.

Each session focuses on freeing restrictions or holdings trapped in a particular region of the body. A practitioner also maintains a holistic view of the client's entire system during each session, thus ensuring the transformational process evolves in a comfortable and harmonious way. Connective tissues within the body hold our bones and muscles in place. By adjusting these connective or *myofascial* tissues, Rolfing properly realigns the body's posture, or structure. Research has demonstrated that Structural Integration, also known as Rolfing, creates more efficient muscle use, allows the body to conserve energy, and creates more economical and refined patterns of movement. Rolfing has also been shown to significantly reduce chronic stress and enhance neurological functioning.

Through soft tissue manipulation and movement education, Rolfers affect the body's structure and function for the long-term. Unlike traditional massage, which focuses on relaxation and relief of muscle discomfort, Rolfing is aimed at improving body alignment, balance, integration, and function. As one's body becomes more organized, chronic strain patterns are alleviated, allowing pain and stress to decrease. Furthermore, Rolfing can speed up injury recovery by reducing pain, stiffness, and muscle tension; improving movement and circulation around joints; and attending to the injury itself, plus any secondary pain or complications that may develop from compensating for an injury.

The Ten Series can be divided into three distinct units.

Sessions 1-3: Called the "sleeve" sessions, numbers one through three strive to loosen and balance surface layers of connective tissue. Specifically, the first session is devoted to enhancing the quality of breath with work on the arms, ribcage and diaphragm. Opening is also started along the upper leg, hamstrings, neck and spine. The second session helps give the body a stable foundation by balancing the foot and muscles of the lower leg. Number three typically involves a "side view" for an understanding of how the head, shoulder girdle, and hips are positionally related to one another when standing under the influence of gravity. Then, the body is addressed within the context of this new vision.

Sessions 4-7: Four through seven are referred to as "core" sessions and examine terrain found between the bottom of the pelvis and top of the head. The idea of core also includes the deep tissue of the legs for its role in support. Session four begins this journey, its territory extends from the inside arch of the foot and up the leg, to the bottom of the pelvis. The fifth session is concerned with balancing surface and deep abdominal muscles to the curve of the back. Number six seeks to enlist more support and moment from the legs, pelvis and lower back, while the seventh session turns its sole attention to the neck and head.

Session 8-10: "Integration" is emphasized throughout the remaining three sessions, as eight, nine and ten provide an opportunity for the practitioner to blend previously established advancements, and ones yet to be made, into the body in a way that encourages smooth movement and natural coordination. During sessions eight and nine, the practitioner is free to decide how best to achieve this integration, as the protocol is unique for each individual. The tenth and final session is also one of integration, but more importantly, serves to inspire a sense of order and balance. Once completed, the wisdom of the Rolfing Ten Series will drive and support the body with health for years to come.

WHAT IS ROLFING MOVEMENT?

Towards the end of her life, Dr. Rolf felt that a movement training component would be a valuable adjunct to her structural ten-series. In her lifetime, Dr. Rolf collaborated with first Dorothy Nolte and then Judith Aston to develop this aspect of Rolfing. Since Dr. Rolf's death in 1979, others, including Jane Harrington, Heather Starsong, Gael Ohlgren and Vivian Jaye have elevated this less familiar style of Rolfing to a level of high art with tremendous transformative value. Currently, approximately 25% of all Rolfers have been certified in Rolf Movement and employ their training as a way of enriching their work. The purpose of Rolfing Movement is to work with the clients to help them identify movement patterns that promote strain and asymmetry in their system. Once the patterns are identified, the Rolf Movement practitioner does not seek to change those patterns, which have served the client well, but rather to offer more economical solutions which promote greater balance and efficiency in the gravitational field.

Like the structural ten-series, Rolfing Movement is taught as a sequence of sessions devoted to specific structural and movement themes. In a classic movement series, the first session is devoted to exploring breathing patterns and using the breath to promote ease and release holdings in the ribs, lungs and respiratory diaphragm. Subsequent sessions address movement patterns in the foot, ankle and knee joints, the hip joint, the arms and head and neck. These sessions are normally repeated to access deeper holding patterns and achieve higher levels of order just as structural Rolfers return to the extremities and upper and lower girdles (the shoulder and pelvis) in the latter sessions to more fully integrate structure and function. Rolfing movement can be explored by clients who have completed a structural series and can serve equally well as an autonomous tool for achieving higher levels of self-awareness and coherence.

IS ROLFING SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN?

A common misunderstanding about Rolfing is that its main value is in correcting long-standing structural patterns. Rolfing can also serve as a prophylactic measure to reverse potentially problematic patterns in the young. One of the things children learn from watching us is how we carry ourselves and they will naturally imitate their parent's language, movement and other modes of expression. These patterns can be seen in family photos and are as much a part of a child's makeup as his hair color, height and predisposition to certain hereditary illnesses. Rolfing can begin to correct patterns, such as hip imbalances which may limit the child's development and mobility.

Also, when children are injured from falls or minor accidents, they may seem to be fine on the outside since the cut or bruise healed. However, as Dr. Rolf pointed out, they are not really the same. Minor changes have taken place in the connective tissue, in their joints and in the muscles that were injured. Small tears or pulls cause the tissue to thicken. Soon, muscles begin to adhere to each other and are less able to function as discrete entities. These changes may express themselves as a slight limp, lower energy, a decrease in range of motion or strength. Early intervention by a Rolfer aware of the unique needs of children can make a profound difference in a child's awareness, comfort level and self-esteem. The importance of receiving loving supportive touch in and of itself is of immeasurable value to a developing child. Rolfing, however, can accomplish so much more, creating palpable change in the child's connective tissue matrix. We have also found that Rolfing adolescents during and after puberty, a time of great insecurity and emotional turmoil for most of us, besides the obvious structural benefits, frequently has a profound effect on the developing child's awareness and comfort in his or her rapidly changing body and mind.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MASSAGE AND ROLFING?

One of the most common misconceptions about Rolfing is that it is a nothing more than a type of very deep massage. There are many varieties of massage, which are particularly effective for loosening tight tissue, reducing stress, detoxing the body and an increased feeling of relaxation and well-being. Since

these benefits are also a byproduct of Rolfing, the general public experience confusion as to the precise difference between our work and the proliferation of effective touch modalities currently available. Ray McCall, an Advanced Rolfer in Boulder and former student of Dr. Rolf, once said that what Rolfers do can be summed up in three words: palpation, discrimination and integration. We palpate, or touch the tissue, feeling for imbalances in tissue texture, quality and temperature to determine where we need to work. We discriminate, or separate fascial layers that adhere and muscles that have been pulled out of position by strain or injury. Finally, we integrate the body, relating its segments in an improved relationship, bringing physical balance in the gravitational field. Other soft-tissue manipulation methods, including massage, are quite good at the first two, but do not balance the body in gravity. As Dr. Rolf used to say: "Anyone can take a body apart, very few know how to put it back together." The true genius of her method is the art and science of reshaping and reorganizing human structure according to clearly defined principles in a systematic and consistent manner.

In addition to our skill as structural integrators, we are also educators, a point Dr. Rolf stressed frequently in her training classes. The role of teacher is something every Rolfer takes seriously. In each session, Rolfers seek to impart insights to clients to increase their awareness and understanding, to help the client make the work we do their own. Our job is to make ourselves obsolete, by empowering our clients to take charge of their own physical and emotional health. Influencing the structural evolution of man on a global level was Dr. Rolf's fondest dream.