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ROLF COURSE

The decades-old system of manipulation aims to put bodies back in balance.

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Article Text:

The Rolfer "hooked in" to the pain in my left shoulder and held it in a tight cramp until somehow, I mysteriously let it go -- or he mashed it out of the way, or something. All I know is, it's gone. My first Rolfing session centered on my lower legs -- opening up the space between the tibia and the fibula to give me a more stable, balanced landing each time I take a step.

*But it was the shoulder work, almost an afterthought, that hooked me. Rolfing, named for the woman who developed it in the '40s, was never popularized until the **Rolf** Institute was established in 1972. It's only now hitting its stride, with baby boomers looking for alternative forms of medicine to make them feel in balance both mentally and physically.*

Most simply, Rolfing is a way of reorganizing the structure of the human body so that body segments are balanced along a vertical line and you feel your entire body as an integrated whole.

It has a reputation for being painful, because the Rolfer applies enough pressure with his or her fingertips, forearm and elbow to free up adhesions that are constricting muscles, joints and even bones that have been pushed, pulled and knocked slightly out of kilter over the years by trauma, stress or bad habits.

A form of what is generically known as bodywork -- which includes osteopathic manipulation, yoga, physical therapy, chiropractic and a lot of lesser-known means of realigning the body -- Rolfing involves manipulation of the body's connective tissue and stretching of muscles to accommodate the new positioning.

"The point is to re-establish order in the structure of the body so that all the major segments are in vertical alignment where they can function properly," says Rey Allen, a certified Rolfer in private practice at Soul Fitness in Fort Worth. "The downward pull of gravity can be an uplifting force if body parts are properly organized for biomechanical efficiency."

Allen pulls the bottom of my T-shirt down and out of shape to demonstrate how gravity can affect the fascia, the envelope of connective tissue that wraps around muscles, joints and other body components like an endless spider web of elastic bands. When a component gets out of place, even a little bit -- jumbled inside the envelope -- it can cause crowding, strain, twisting and binding, which force the body to work against gravity.

Picture a building that has lost its architectural integrity, Allen suggests. When a building is even slightly off center, gravity can cause it to sag until finally it loses balance and begins to collapse under its own weight.

I walked out of my introductory Rolfing session visualizing that building -- slightly askew and in danger of falling down -- and thinking: How fortuitous! I've felt off balance, like that, as long as I can remember. I also wondered what I was letting myself in for when I agreed to return for at least two more sessions.

Although Rolfing has gotten a reputation over the years as "New Age physical therapy," Rolfers say it is actually an outgrowth of yoga and more closely related to osteopathic manipulation, which changes the way the bones of the body relate to each other but is not involved with stretching soft tissue and lengthening muscles.

Dr. Jennifer Alexander, an internal medicine specialist in Fort Worth, started a series of 10 weekly Rolfing sessions last April and says she now schedules a "general session" about every three months to keep her structural integration at its prime.

"I was having some back pain, not resolving with osteopathic manipulation, and my doctor recommended it," said Alexander, an osteopathic physician.

"Almost immediately, I was able to breathe more deeply. My posture improved significantly. My overall energy increased, my flexibility. Everything got better," she says.

The improvements were not without pain.

"For me, it was a painful process -- mostly a little muscle soreness -- but I'm pain-free now," Alexander says. "It's an interactive treatment, not like a massage, where you are passive. You incorporate a lot of breathing. You breathe into his hands [as he grasps deep tissue], working along with him while he works muscles."

The idea of breathing into your kneecap or the outer arch of your foot may seem a little strange, indeed even New Age-y, but concentrate and think it through, and you can feel the breath rush out of your lungs and into the space indicated.

Terry Dybala, who works for Mental Health Mental Retardation of Tarrant County, started a series of 10 Rolfing sessions in September after her foot became tangled in an auger last summer.

"I had been Rolfed before, years ago, and I thought, 'Oh, my God, this is going to be painful,' but I knew pain -- foot pain, and hip pain from trying to compensate for the foot pain, and I was open to the whole idea that Rolfing was going to help me feel better in all kinds of ways," says Dybala, who considered physical therapy but says she chose Rolfing because she was looking for more than pain relief.

"I was just twisted. My body was out of balance," she says. "My goal was to be comfortable in my own skin, to stand straighter, taller, to get grounded, become a little more spiritual. It makes me feel more content with myself, more connected physically and spiritually. I wish more people would do it."

Dybala believes Rolfing's reputation for pain, along with the cost -- \$100 to \$170 per session in the Fort Worth/Dallas area, depending in part on the length of the session (60 to 90 minutes) -- has prevented it from becoming more popular. But, she says, "Most people don't hesitate to pay \$120 for a nice pair of shoes, and this makes you feel a lot better than new shoes."

There's a lot of positive reinforcement involved in Rolfing.

"That's right. That's good. That's what you want to do. Easy now. That's good. Are you still with me? That's good. Breathe into my hand. You can do this. It's going to start easing off. That's what it wants to do. That's it. You've got it," Allen says over and over as he works strong fingertips and sometimes his forearm deep into long-constricted muscles.

*Rolfing is a 10-step system of structural integration and movement education developed by Ida P. **Rolf**, Ph.D., to help deal with her own family health problems. Born in 1896, she earned her doctorate in biological chemistry from Columbia University in New York City in 1920 and worked at the Rockefeller Institute before she began traveling and teaching her philosophy and methods worldwide. Finally, she established the **Rolf** Institute of Structural Integration in Boulder, Colo., in 1972.*

By the time she died in 1979, Rolfing centers were developing in Germany, Brazil and Australia.

Allen is one of Tarrant County's two certified Rolfers who graduated from the school. Dallas has about 18.

Linda Loggins is in private practice in southwest Fort Worth.

"Typically, everyone who comes through here wants some sort of change -- sometimes they are dealing with a physical problem or they want to improve their posture or they feel like they are stiff and stuck; they don't have the flexibility they once did," Loggins says. "Sometimes they are in pain, but it may not be physical. It might be emotional. Sometimes, they are just curious. A lot of people still don't know what Rolfing is."

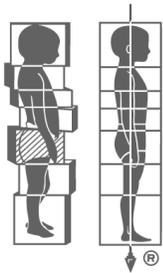
I walked out of my third Rolfing session feeling lighter and longer and looking up so that the tilt of my forehead was no longer putting extra gravitational force on my neck. I untucked my pelvis, which had the effect of flattening my belly without me consciously holding it in. I was more aware of my feet and their connection with the rest of me, including my shoulders, which seemed to hang more freely from my spine.

I felt good -- inside and out.

*Note to readers: Texas once required Rolfers to be licensed with the Department of Health as massage therapists, but currently there are no state requirements. The best way to ensure quality and safety is to look for certification by the **Rolf** Institute, a nonprofit scientific and educational organization.*

For more information, go to www.rolf.org or www.rolfingfortworth.com (now www.rolfingnewyork.com); or call Rey Allen at (917) 539 1707.

Building-block principle



The Rolfing logo illustrates how the procedure can help the alignment of even those with severe problems. The first silhouette shows a young boy with Legg-Perthes disease, a bone-and-joint disease that usually affects the thigh bone. His body is depicted as a disorganized stack of blocks. Think of building blocks, stacked one on top of the other. Poke one block (anywhere along the column) just slightly out of place. Pull another out just a fraction. With enough pushing, pulling and twisting, gravity -- which has been holding up the stack -- will cause it to come tumbling down. The second silhouette suggests the effect of Rolfing: Each segment of the child's body is stacked in vertical alignment.