

Structural Integration: Gain Without Pain

By Mark Donahue

Structural Integration or Rolfing®, as it is commonly called, is the result of the inspiration and determination of Dr. Ida P. Rolf. Dr. Rolf, a research biochemist, developed and refined the manipulative techniques and the theoretical foundation of Structural Integration over 50 years. In search of answers to personal and family problems Dr. Rolf studied yoga, homeopathy, chiropractics and osteopathy. Her exploration of these various disciplines, her knowledge of physics, biochemistry and her experience from years of working to “fix people up” coalesced into the method she called Structural Integration. During the 40’s and 50’s she taught her work to chiropractors and osteopaths without receiving wide recognition. In 1965 she arrived to teach at Esalen. From there the news of Dr. Rolf and her work spread. In 1971 the Rolf Institute was established in Boulder, Colorado. The Institute trains Rolfers™, provides continuing education for current practitioners, and promotes research on Structural Integration. The institute has flourished and today has an active membership of certified Rolfers worldwide.

The Rolf Method of Structural Integration includes physical manipulation and movement education. The manipulative technique involves a series of sessions. This series aims to balance and lengthen the whole body, to bring ease of movement, and to address the specific problems of the client. The goals of Rolf movement education are to bring clients to a greater awareness of their bodies and how they live within them. The education provides new options of movement and helps enhance the changes brought about by the physical manipulation. The process of Structural Integration attracts people for various reasons: to rid themselves of the effects of physical trauma and chronic pain, to improve their overall well-being as well as their performance in sports and other tasks, and finally to ease stress and tensions and to find release from old patterns of behavior.

How is it that Structural Integration can address such a variety of issues? To begin with the overall goal of the process is to bring the large segments of the body — the head and neck, the arms and shoulders, the torso, the pelvis and legs — into balance with each other and to harmonize the whole with the constant force of gravity. This goal is accomplished by the physical manipulation of the connective tissue. Connective tissue is what gives form to the body and is the primary structure of support. It forms a complex, layered network of support and communication throughout the body. It encircles individual muscle fibers, each muscle and muscle group. It connects muscle to bone, bone to bone, and envelops and supports the organs, nerves and blood vessels. This interconnectedness means that a change anywhere in the body can effect the entire body.

Physical injuries, structurally unsound use of the body, and psychological tension involve the entire body in a pattern of strain. These patterns, imprinted in the connective tissue, are expressed by such symptoms as chronic pain or a sense of heaviness and fatigue. The amazing thing about connective tissue, and what makes Structural Integration possible, is that it changes readily in response to touch. The process of Structural Integration involves exploring the network of connective tissue, finding areas of shortness and strain, and giving them length and ease. Through this action the overall pattern of stress is unraveled, layer by layer, so that the body can assert its fundamental integrity. In this return to balance the structure becomes harmonized with the force of gravity and the symptoms of the stress pattern, the aches and pains, tend to diminish and often disappear.

In addition to those who come to resolve specific problems, many athletes and individuals undergo Structural Integration to improve their sports performance and to upgrade their general well-being. The process gives these people the opportunity to understand the strengths and limitations of their physical structure. Through the touch of the practitioner and the body re-education, clients examine how they sit, stand, walk, run and perform everyday tasks and learn to make these activities more efficient and more supportive of their physical health.

It is fairly easy to understand Structural Integration as a form of physical therapy, but how do you explain the many psychological changes that occur for many people? Dr. Rolf voices one of the basic assumptions of Structural Integration when she says, “Physical function and psychological function are just different aspects of the same process, so when you change one the other must change.” In many cases work with the body is the most direct way to unravel our psychological knots and to release old behavior patterns. In many ways the process is similar to refurbishing your house to make the space more liveable. While working on the chest of a client or helping a friend clean out a closet they may discover things long forgotten. Once this stuff is brought to awareness they can decide what is valuable and what can be discarded.

Unfortunately when most people think of Rolfing the first word that comes to mind is pain. Indeed in its earlier days Rolfing was more intense than it needed to be. Having outgrown its rambunctious adolescence, Structural Integration has become more subtle and more gentle. In fact Rolfers found that extreme force, that oversteps the client’s limits, elicits a defense response that is counterproductive to the goals of Structural Integration.

Structural Integration is about change. Change is a condition of life. Practitioners of Structural Integration take advantage of this fact and help their clients realize the changes that they want to make and help them integrate them into their lives. Unconscious physical and mental patterns exert themselves continuously. Some of these patterns cause pain and discomfort. The purpose of Structural Integration is to examine these patterns, to remind us that change is possible, and to provide alternatives that increase and perpetuate our well-being.