

Mission: body organization: Rolfing helps you realign when you're out of order. Here's how to find a practitioner to lend a hand

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Feeling disorganized? No, not your desk--your body. If so, Rolfing, a brand name for structural integration, may help you get things back in order. Based on the teachings of Ida Rolf, PhD, who believed that the body needs assistance to achieve balance and to perform at its best, Rolfing realigns the body by working with soft tissue: muscles, tendons, ligaments and fascia (the tissue that encloses muscles and organs).

"It's not so much that a Rolfing session is radically different from what happens during a massage session, but the goals they're trying to achieve are different," says Michael Polon, a certified advanced Rolfer in Denver, Colorado, and instructor at the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration. Though the hands-on manipulations of massage and Rolfing are similar, the goal of some massage modalities is to relax the muscles, while the goal of Rolfing is to create change in connective tissue and effectively reorganize the body.

the organization process

Structural integration is based on a 10-session process sometimes called the Recipe. The first three sessions are devoted to loosening and balancing connective tissues closer to the surface; four "core" sessions focus on deep tissues; and three "integrative" sessions work the middle layers, tying the initial and core sessions together. But, Polon says, Rolfing allows room for flexibility: "You can take the goals of the 10-series Recipe and sculpt them to fit [the needs of the client]," says Polon.

Client-practitioner communication is vital to the Rolfing process. In the first session, your Rolfer will probably begin by asking you to provide a detailed health history and give you the opportunity to share your goals for the treatment. You'll want to let him or her know about any medications you're taking, your activity level and any other treatments you might be receiving, such as chiropractic adjustments or massage, so they can be taken into account when creating your program.

After you've talked through your health history and goals, the Rolfer will perform a thorough physical evaluation. For this, you'll want to wear as little clothing as possible--underwear is best, though it's okay to keep on a pair of gym shorts. "It's important that clients feel comfortable," Polon emphasizes. The Rolfer will want to observe your body in motion--walking, breathing, doing hackbends, etc.--to assess where there may be alignment problems.

Generally, a Rolfer will start by examining the way your pelvis, shoulders and trunk move in relation to one another, though if you have pain or discomfort in an area like your knee or ankle, your Rolfer may concentrate on that area first. Sometimes a Rolfer will also use photographs or videotape to help you see where your alignment could use improvement and to help track your progress.

The actual manipulation may feel a bit like a deep sports massage, minus the slippery feeling of lotion or oil. Areas of your body that are under chronic stress or recovering from injury could feel uncomfortable. Though the early style of Rolfing (which became popular during the 1970s) had a reputation for being intense, it doesn't have to be painful. A good Rolfer will work at the level the client is ready for, says Sharon Sklar, a certified advanced Rolfer in West Hartford, Connecticut. She uses imagery to help her clients relax: "I tell them to imagine my fingertips are like hot corn on the cob, and their body is a big tab of butter."

Ultimately, Rolfers seek to reduce long-term strain by helping people learn to integrate the therapy into their daily lives. "We teach people how to use their bodies differently," says Sklar, who's been a Rolfer since 1981. The result, she affirms, is that her clients feel freer in their bodies, stand taller and straighter and look better. And instead of starting over at each session, the results of Rolfing are cumulative and lasting: "From the moment someone starts getting Rolfed until three to six months after they're completely finished, their body is going to keep changing," says Sklar.

Sessions usually last 50-90 minutes and cost \$80-\$150. Tipping is not generally expected. While health insurance policies often won't pay for Rolfing, Polon points out that an increasing number of automobile insurance policies will pay for the therapy after an accident. It may also be covered by insurance if a person receives a referral from a medical professional. Rolfing can often be covered by medical

savings or flexible spending accounts.

finding a lending hand

Only those practitioners trained and certified by the Rolf Institute may legally use the word Rolfing or refer to themselves as Rolfers. The Guild for Structural Integration is another respected organization and training program dedicated to the traditional teachings of Dr. Rolf that branched off from the Rolf Institute, and though graduates of GSI can't call themselves Rolfers, the philosophies and background of the two organizations are similar. Regardless, you'll want to make sure your practitioner is well trained: anyone can claim to be using the Rolf method even if his or her schooling consists of nothing more than a weekend workshop--or no formal training at all. To find a certified Rolfer, visit rolf.org or call (800) 530-8875. To find a GSI-trained practitioner, visit rolfguild.org or call (800) 447-0150.

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