

STAR-TELEGRAM

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Try the Rolf course

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It's painful, but intense body realignment has its benefits

FORT WORTH, Texas — 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."

I walked out of my introductory Rolfing session thinking: I've felt off balance as long as I can remember. I wondered what I was getting into when I agreed to return for at least two more sessions.

The improvements were not without pain.

"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.

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.

On the Web

For more information, go to www.rolf.org.