

The Whole-Body Approach
to Well-being

Rolfing® Structural Integration

by Jeffrey Maitland, Ph.D.

Upright is not uptight. Even if you don't appreciate clever slogans, you probably recognize this one is based on an important insight into our physical nature: Our sense of well-being and ability to function is uniquely tied to how well or poorly we manage and maintain our upright form in gravity.

Some 60 years ago, Ida P. Rolf, Ph.D., pursued this insight with unwavering determination and developed her revolutionary inquiry standpoint and practice of soft-tissue manipulation and movement education known as Rolfing® Structural Integration.

Simply stated, her vision was about enhancing the functioning of the whole body by making it *right* with itself and the gravitational field. If you can imagine how it feels to live in a fluid, light, balanced body, free of pain, stiffness and chronic stress, at ease with itself and the gravitational field, then you will understand the purpose of the Rolfing process.

At war with gravity

When we are out of alignment, gravity drags us down, just as it drags down a building that has lost its architectural integrity. Whether from poor posture, injury, illness or emotional distress, a misaligned body is at war with gravity. We experience this war as pain, stress and depleted energy. When the body loses its architectural integrity, fascia shortens and thickens in characteristic patterns of strain and tightness.

Much in the way a snag in a sweater distorts its form,

our body can be distorted by its fascial snags. To make matters worse, normal movement is further compromised by muscles adhering to each other.

Transform the sky, don't just push the stars

The Rolfer™ takes advantage of the plasticity of connective tissue by applying highly specific, intelligently modulated, appropriate pressure to the patterns of fascial strain found throughout the body. Fascia responds by softening and lengthening. Appearing as a kind of sculptor of living flesh, the Rolfer might address local areas of fascial strain while encouraging global changes to cascade throughout the body.

When strain patterns are released in the right order, the body rights itself in gravity. In general, Rolfing techniques should not be confused with massage techniques or deep-tissue techniques. Even though those techniques are effective in their own right, they do not engage the tissue in the way effective Rolfing Structural Integration requires.

It is important to realize, however, Rolfing Structural Integration, itself, is not a technique. It is a unique inquiry standpoint systematically designed to



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enhance function by organizing the body in gravity.
An inquiry standpoint is analogous to a point of view, a

way of looking at the world that determines how you value the things of your world. In science and other rational

endeavors, it is a particular orientation toward reality in terms of which a researcher decides what is and is not relevant to his particular line of inquiry. So for Rolfing, you could say Rolf's inquiry standpoint is what some people loosely call her vision: Given that the body functions best when it is organized in gravity, what conditions must be fulfilled in order for the human body to achieve optimal alignment?

The mere application of Rolfing techniques without a thorough understanding of the inquiry standpoint that generated them is not Rolfing Structural Integration and can cause harm.

At minimum, a well-trained Rolfer possesses four basic skills: a sure mastery of technique; a thorough understanding of how to facilitate an architecturally sound body; a highly educated ability to recognize integration and precisely perceive patterns of structural disorder based on a command of comprehensive taxonomies of assessment; and, lastly, the ability to work holistically. If any of these abilities are missing, designing treatment strategies becomes a hit-and-miss ordeal, because the practitioner is unable to properly answer three questions fundamental to all therapy:

What do I do first?

What do I do next?

When am I done?

A Rolfer possessing these four skills does not work on body parts and symptoms in a piecemeal fashion, as if they were separate phenomena. Always attentive to relationships, including the relationship of gravity, a Rolfer metaphorically transforms the sky—she does not just push the stars.

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Work holistically

Focusing on the fourth skill, working holistically begins with recognizing the body is not a soft machine. It is not organized like a machine, and it is not composed of separate parts existing side by side. Rather, the body is a seamless, unified living whole in which no one aspect is more fundamental to the makeup and organization of the whole than the whole itself. What we call parts are relationships implicating each other. Essentially, the body is not made of parts, but is composed of relationships, all of which are related. Rolf extended this notion of holism to include the body's relationship to its environment and gravity.

The logic of holism reveals a symptom is also a relationship. Think of a kink in a wire. The kink is a modification of the wire and has no independent existence apart from the wire. Similarly, a symptom, such as a joint fixation or a tight muscle, is aberrant modification of a larger pattern and, hence, does not exist in isolation.

Any attempt to address a symptom without understanding this reciprocal relationship does not usually produce lasting change.

Rolfers work with the symptoms of distress in a number of ways. Sometimes they work directly on the symptom itself, but the holistic approach is the norm.

Somewhat analogous to how removing a kink requires manipulating the wire, Rolfers transform the aberrant pattern of which the symptom is a modification into a pattern that no longer supports the symptom—all while making sure the whole body can adapt to and support the changes in relation to gravity.

Traced from an actual photograph, the official logo of Rolfing Structural Integration is a wonderful example of what 10 sessions with a Rolfer can accomplish. When the Rolfer is finished and the aberrant movement patterns have been corrected, you will often see dramatic changes resulting from being effortlessly upright and freely appropriating gravity.

These changes may include easy, fluid movement, improved performance, cessation of pain, better posture, improved coordination, greater flexibility, reduced

Is Rolfing for You?

I am told Ida Rolf saw her work as a special kind of education whereby the burden of gravity upon the human body is alleviated. I have taken this to mean that a Rolfer's job is to connect with and cultivate whatever it is in us that knows how to find ease in sitting, standing or lying down.

To be honest, I do not know what this *knowing* is. I do not know what to call it or how it does what it does—but I know it. I know how to work with it. I know that it can be lost or forgotten or prevented from expressing itself. And I know that it exists in every living being. For me, every session is an opportunity to communicate with this knowing—in both myself and whomever I might be working with. To communicate and connect with this knowing can make for profound healing, an experience that is almost sacred, characterized as it is by silence, peace, mystery and play.

—Soken Graf, San Francisco, California

Practicing as a Rolfer is fascinating. Each session unfolds in a unique way and is an exploration for both the client and me. One hour may be filled with movement and

laughter; another is more inwardly focused and silent.

On my part, there is an ongoing inquiry into what will be the most effective way to engage this person in the process. When the tone and pace of the session match those of the client, there is a resonance we both experience as a comfortable connection.

I am moved by witnessing the beauty of the body's innate tendency toward wholeness. I see this in the way restrictions in one part of the body disappear when balance is restored elsewhere. It is also there in the information my hands perceive, which guides my work. Most of all, it is present as I learn from the client's deep knowing what part of the exploration is most meaningful for her.

A hallmark of a completed Rolfing series is uniform brilliance. I notice many ways that uniform brilliance can manifest, including fluidity, a peaceful stillness, a sparkle or stability. Uniform brilliance also manifests in the emotional, relational and spiritual realms.

I touch the physical structure of the body with great respect, knowing my work is contacting the whole being under my hands.

—Rihab Yaqub, Scottsdale, Arizona

inflammation, expanded sense of spirituality, enhanced sense of well-being and joy, and faster recovery from injuries, to name just a few.

New developments

Since Rolf's death in 1979, the work has continued to evolve and develop through the efforts of the Rolf Institute® of Structural Integration faculty. Although Rolfing practice began as a rather uncomfortable style of manipulation, today, its techniques have been broadened to include a softer, more discriminating sense of touch. These newer techniques are both less invasive and sometimes more precise in their ability to release and organize the body at every level. Many clients who have experienced the new approach are surprised to discover it is often gentler than other commonly known forms of manual therapy.

Also, a host of soft-tissue techniques has been created that can easily release restrictions of the facets of the spine and



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other joints without resorting to high-velocity, low-amplitude thrusting techniques. New techniques have been created, or appropriated and modified, from other disciplines that deal with the cranium, strain patterns in the bones, internal organs, nervous system, cavities and coelomic sacs.

Rolf Movement® Integration, originally developed by Rolf as a kind of self-help Rolf yoga, has evolved far beyond its original concerns to become a highly effective form of therapy in its own right. After years of hard work by the movement faculty, Rolf Movement Integration is now integrated into every Rolfer's training.


In addition to new ways of understanding and releasing the effects of emotional and physical trauma, the energetic side of the work is also newly being explored and taught.

Originally, Rolf taught her work as a 10-session protocol, which she affectionately called "the recipe." While this protocol is powerful and flexible enough to help many people, running every client through the same sequence of treatment strategies has its limitations. When it comes to the human body, one size does not fit all.

These difficulties led advanced faculty to develop both a principle-centered, decision-making process and comprehensive taxonomies of assessment. As a result, advanced Roling work is no longer bound to the recipe or to a predetermined number of sessions.

There is a growing body of research that supports many of the claims made for the Roling method of structural integration.

When all is said and done, the creative spirit of Roling Structural Integration is alive and well in the Rolf Institute, the school Rolf founded to carry on her work.

Jeffrey Maitland, Ph.D., is a Certified Advanced Rolfer™ and advanced Roling instructor. Internationally known as a teacher, author and innovator, Maitland was a tenured professor of philosophy at Purdue University before becoming a Rolfer. He is also an ordained Zen monk and one of eight advanced Roling instructors who teaches at The Rolf Institute of Structural Integration (www.rolf.org), which offers training and advanced classes in Roling® Structural Integration. 

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