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All Wrapped Up the Rolfing technique gets deep.

by Melinda Copp

Ten or even five years ago, mention of the words “Rolfing®” or “structural integration” likely elicited quite a few blank stares. And most people outside the holistic health industry probably never considered that their everyday aches and pains could be associated with connective tissue. But today, like many other holistic therapies, structural integration is a growing field. As more and more people are realizing that they don’t have to live with bodily discomforts, poor posture and the stress that these conditions create, they are actively seeking new solutions.

As awareness of structural integration grows, demand for practitioners is growing with it. For massage therapists, structural integration offers a great opportunity for career advancement and a deeper knowledge of the human body.

What is structural integration?



Structural integration was created by Ida P. Rolf, PhD, a biochemist who, more than 50 years ago, started developing her holistic system of soft tissue manipulation and movement education as a way to organize the entire body in gravity. She studied a broad array of sciences and holistic therapies, ranging from atomic physics and mathematics to yoga and homeopathic medicine. All of her research played a part in her development of structural integration.

Structural integration works to align the human structure in space by altering fascia. Fascia is an elastic network of fiber that encases and protects muscles, and separates all functional units of the body.

To understand how fascia works, think of the human body as a complex system of blocks wrapped in this elastic layer of connective tissue. Each block may be made up of additional smaller blocks and arranged in their own sacs of connective tissue, all of which work together as a whole in movements, behaviors and responses. Ideally, these blocks are arranged in a balanced, ordered pattern that allows for normal movement. But when injury, strain or gravity alters the arrangement of the blocks, the fascia network is also strained and altered, and the entire system can be disrupted.

Because fascia works as a whole throughout the body, damaged areas transmit strain in various directions and a person may feel pain or discomfort in places that aren't related to their injury in conventional ways. Successfully integrating a person's structure means creating symmetry by realigning the components of their body in three-dimensional space. So essentially, structural integrators work with a client's connective tissue to resculpt the entire body and create symmetry on all three major axes.

Structural integration work is designed to be done in 10 to 12 sessions—with one session every week or two—and each session addresses a different area of the body. It is a process that involves reassessment in each session, and nurturing the client-practitioner relationship with open communication.

Clients often see and feel a difference in their stature and well-being after just one session, and the results of a full series can continue long after it is completed.

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"We take before and after photos, and people actually look better six months after completing a series than they do when they first complete it—so the work continues to work long after it's been done," says Michael Polon, a Roling instructor at the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration in Boulder, Colorado.

Although structural integration clients may require periodic tune-ups after completion, they don't usually need to go through the entire series again, unless they suffer an injury.

Rolring and massage



"While in massage school, I took a friend's suggestion and received 10 sessions from a Rolfer. The process changed my life, although I didn't completely understand what was happening to me at the time," says Jeannie Kelley, LMT and certified advanced structural integration practitioner, who practices at Island Soma Therapy in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. "All I knew was that my psycho-emotional world was being rocked via the body, and I was hooked."

This initial experience eventually led Kelley to pursue certification in structural integration. This is how it happens for many structural integrators, whether they come from a massage therapy background or not—they experience the effects and benefits for themselves, and they want to know more.

"I was already interested in deep tissue massage, but what impressed me the most about structural integration was how it dramatically took everything to an entirely new level of educational, experiential therapy," says Kelley. "I was blown away with a curious fascination and it was just a matter of time before I got around to taking the training myself."

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Many massage therapists seek deeper meaning and solutions to the problems they encounter in their practices. They may feel they've hit a wall in their abilities to solve their clients' problems, and they often find that structural integration holds some answers for them.

"There just came a point when I was frustrated that I saw problems in clients but I couldn't help them because I didn't have the tools," says Libby Eason, a certified advanced Rolfer and Rolf movement practitioner based in Atlanta, Georgia, who practiced massage therapy for six years before pursuing structural integration. Eason also teaches at the Rolf Institute and serves on the board of directors of the International Association of Structural Integrators (IASI).

"The feedback I receive from folks who come into Rolring training is they get context for the issues they are working to solve in their massage clients," says Polon, who teaches in the school's program designed for students with massage therapy experience. His classes examine the ways the human body relates to itself and how compensatory strain patterns develop throughout the body.

Massage therapists also have the advantage of general experience in bodywork when they seek structural integration training. They already know how to touch and how to develop and maintain professional relationships with clients. They are familiar with anatomy and often have built a practice of clients that will be eager to try structural integration from familiar hands. From there, the hardest part may be simply jumping in and learning the new skills.

"Letting go of what you know well, what you do well and what you like well [in order] to learn something new is hard," says Eason. "It's like stepping into the unknown and that creates some anxiety, just like anything new."

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Becoming certified

Marilyn Beech, executive director of the IASI, affirms that structural integration is getting more publicity, more people are seeking practitioners and more people are seeking certification.

"I would say there are about 6,000 structural integration practitioners in the world, and that's probably doubled from 10 years ago," says Beech. "It started with one school 30 years ago, [and there are] about 12 schools now that do a good job."



For anyone interested in pursuing structural integration as a career advancement option, the best place to start is through a series of sessions, which is required by most schools as a prerequisite to enrollment anyway. Then start looking at the variety of programs available. Some schools, such as the Rolf Institute, offer accelerated programs for massage therapists that allow them to skip basic bodywork classes that were covered in their massage training.

Each school's approach to structural integration is slightly different. For example, Hellerwork is known for a strong mind-body component that involves the practitioner talking to clients about their awareness and attitudes associated with different parts of the body, as well as what inspires the client and where that inspiration might be felt physically in the body. The Rolf Institute has a special Rolfling movement integration course of study that emphasizes how people experience and use their bodies as well as their structural organization. This program teaches practitioners how to make clients aware of inhibiting

movement patterns so they can better use their bodies.

"There are plenty of schools out there, and most are really good," says Michael Mitchell, a Hellerwork practitioner at Body Solutions in Solana Beach, California. "Talk to people to find a school that's right for you."

Keep in mind that structural integration is not something you can learn in one course. The IASI requires a minimum of 650 hours of training for professional membership, and according to Eason, it's not possible to practice structural integration without that level of training.

Your future in structural integration

Structural integration is a practice that massage therapists can easily grow into if they're seeking new challenges and solutions. The benefits of becoming certified include gaining a deeper understanding of the human body and how it works, branching out into a growing field and, for many people, increasing job satisfaction.

"It's transformational work," says Eason. "I learn something new every time I do it."

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