

Structural & Functional Integration - an overview By Linda McClure

As examples of the structural and functional integration technique, Hellerwork, Rolfing, The Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais all have something in common. They all optimize the postural awareness of the individual in response to gravity, and they all see people as integrated holistic individuals. The educational and holistic theme weaves its way through all of these modalities and seeks to see the individual not as a presenting symptom but as a unique and whole person, with education and self awareness being an important focus of the treatments.

Whilst Alexander and Feldenkrais work with clients fully clothed, receiving sessions either one-on-one or in a class situation, Hellerwork and Rolfing treatments require clients to receive the work in their underwear and has the practitioner working hands on, directly on the skin, or more technically-speaking, on the connective tissues of the body.

Rolfing

Structural Integration is a term Dr Ida Rolf coined for the bodywork process she developed in response to her frustration with finding a solution for a family health crisis. Born in 1896 Dr Rolf was one of the first women to receive a Ph.D. in biophysics at Columbia University. Rolfing Structural Integration was developed around an ordered 10 session series using deep tissue fascial release techniques developed from Dr Rolf's research. Dr Rolf taught her clients to make micro movements that mimicked more functional patterns whilst she performed hands on bodywork. Through this method she helped her clients organize around a more accurate and dynamic postural line, balancing the segments of the body (head, neck, torso, arms, and legs) in to a relating whole.

Dr Rolf, although an extremely pragmatic individual, held a deep reverence for the body's ability to self heal at a body, mind and spiritual level. She postulated that when we organize our structure accurately around the gravitational line, the increase in vitality, and clarity of thought, assists in releasing blockages of our emotions, feelings and expressions. Although Rolfing practitioners do not seek to process psychological matters or deal specifically with medical conditions, they maintain that through their process of deep tissue bodywork and body awareness, a person is capable of finding a better connection with their inner locus of control from which health at all levels emanates.

Dr Rolf was incidentally a great friend of Moshe Feldenkrais who created the Feldenkrais Method and looked at the issue of structure and function from the other direction ie. he maintained that our structure adapted and changed according to function. This can be seen if we look at how people's bodies change when they are involved in a particular sporting activity over time eg. rugby, weight lifting. However it is argued that a particular body type should gravitate towards the sport that is easiest to perform. Dr Rolf and Moshe Feldenkrais spent one entire evening arguing this exact point (oblivious to the fact they were celebrating Dr Rolf's 80th birthday) – much to everyone's amusement. Of course both were right as their arguments do not exclude each other – structure effects function, and function effects structure, moving in a circular fashion, each influencing the other.

The Feldenkrais Method

Feldenkrais is an educational approach to body movement that teaches individuals how to move naturally and efficiently. The method was developed by Moshe Feldenkrais, born in Russia in 1904. A well-travelled and educated man Feldenkrais used his knowledge of biology, anatomy, physical development, neurology, engineering and the martial arts to develop his theories. He maintained that the key to regaining function and health is to tap in to the nervous system.

We know that habits come out of adaptation and are essential to life. They enable us to put much of our movement on automatic pilot which frees up the brain for other things eg. driving a car. However not all habits have healthy outcomes. When they are in response to trauma and the desperation of surviving dysfunctional family situations, they can eventually lead to health problems, physical injury and low self-esteem.

Feldenkrais maintained that self image contained four sequential parts – movement, sensation, feeling and thought. For example angry feelings and associated body sensations, often create negative thoughts, that can make the body and posture become contracted and rigid resulting in restricted and unnatural movement. Tension and strain that is created through misalignment can often feel like some kind of internal muscular handbrake permanently jammed on. Once balance and alignment are re-established the human body becomes much more efficient, leaving more vital energy available instead of the tiredness that comes from fighting bad posture and gravity. With new insights into how attitudes and beliefs can influence posture, physical health and wellbeing, clients are able to maintain their new states of freedom and continue to improve in the future.

Feldenkrais sessions typically last 30-60 minutes and work in two formats;

- Functional Integration Lessons, which are private one-on-one sessions tailored to the client's needs
- Awareness Through Movement classes taught in a group setting.

The practitioner uses gentle touch and suggestions in the sessions that lead to discovery by the client of a new way to move. Once incorporated, these new movement patterns help clients discard the old inefficient and outdated ones. Both formats can be practiced and mentally rehearsed as daily activities are performed.

Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique was developed in the early twentieth century by Frederic Matthias Alexander. Alexander, a Shakespearean actor (born in 1869) began to develop problems projecting his voice early on in his career, to the extent that he actually lost his voice during performances. Unable to gain reprieve from conventional medicine, Alexander used his intuition to begin looking at his body posture, particularly how he held his head and neck when performing. Alexander spent 10 years examining how he used his body and found that with a relaxed neck and head his vocal chords could work without strain. Better alignment in the neck and head spread to the torso, which also encouraged open breathing and a more natural posture. The Alexander Technique is possibly the oldest form of western bodywork still in use today.

There are three stages of awareness that clients learn in the Alexander Technique:

1. To release unwanted tension that has accumulated over the years
2. To learn more efficient ways of moving, standing or sitting that put less stress on the body
3. To learn new ways of reacting physically, emotionally and mentally to various situations

Clients can receive individual lessons or participate in group lessons in movement education and postural awareness. Because of Alexander's original profession, the Alexander Technique has become very popular with actors, singers, teachers, and musicians in the performing arts.

Hellerwork Structural Integration

Hellerwork structural integration is a multi-level education experience that works with the whole person. It offers an inclusive approach to chronic muscular pain syndromes and in particular, back pain. The process of Hellerwork emphasizes prevention and education through a dynamic system of deep tissue myofascial release, movement re-education, and dialogue. Hellerwork does not seek to fix a person, rather it is seen as a powerful somatic educational process where client and practitioner collaborate to facilitate both physiological freedom and psychological awareness.

Hellerwork structural integration was developed by Joseph Heller, born in Poland in 1940. Heller, a former aerospace engineer with NASA, trained with Dr Ida Rolf in 1972 and was at one time President of the Rolfing Institute. However, although Heller saw the value inherent in the ordered sequence of the 10 Rolfing sessions, he also observed clients returning with the same problems over time. He therefore saw a need to explore new concepts and in 1978 set up his own school to explore the idea of integrating postural and movement lessons within the bodywork session, in order to retain the changes achieved in the session.

Further research also revealed that his clients tended to store emotional distress in particular parts of their bodies in the form of physical holding patterns. For example holding back negative emotions often meant tense and uncomfortable shoulders and back pain, and depression usually meant a collapse and slumping in the chest. It was clear to him that if his clients had movement, bodywork and psychological discourse integrated into each session they would be able to see immediately how the releases and shifts (both physical and psychological), could be integrated into their daily life. Heller therefore added an eleventh session to his series and based the sessions loosely around the three psychological developmental phases of childhood (basic foundational movement), teenage years (creative and more experimental movement), and maturity (sophisticated and integrative movement). Heller then found that the changes his clients experienced in his sessions tended to be permanent.

Joseph Heller predicted that in the future, Structural Integration practitioners, osteopaths and therapists from the functional integration fields would be seen in our hospitals and medical centres as a normal part of the community's healthcare, and that a more holistic approach was the only way to real healing and health. He often wondered what would happen if the leaders of the world received this type of bodywork regularly – how this might influence them in their decisions to invade a country or sentence a person to death.....or not. If people are truly in touch with their body, mind and spirit, what kind of an amazing world might that create?

References:

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