

WHAT IS STRUCTURAL INTEGRATION?

By Jean Louise Green, Certified Advanced Rolf Practitioner and CMT

A practitioner of Structural Integration works with the fascia or connective tissue of the body. Fascia is what gives muscle its form and shape. It is also thought of as the body's packing material that holds muscles, bones, and organs together. Healthy fascia or connective tissue is elastic, flexible, resilient, long and porous. Fascia responds to gravitational force, injury, illness, emotional trauma and everyday stress by dehydrating, thickening and shortening. This response to stress by the connective tissue leads to compressions and torque in the fascial matrix or planes throughout the entire body, pulling the body out of alignment. Imagine a snag in a sweater and how the pull of that snag affects the fibers around it. In Structural Integration, the body is assisted with the rehydration and organization of the connective tissues. Dr. Ida P. Rolf, the founder of Structural Integration, believed that the organization of the fascial planes was basic to the good health of all other systems in the body.

Fascia or connective tissue is made up of two major components. That is, collagen and ground substance. Collagen is the structural component of the fascia. It is made up of tough white strands of protein that give the connective tissue its shape, tensile strength, and resiliency. Ground substance is the nutritive component of the fascia. It is the liquid medium through which nutritional exchanges take place in the connective tissue of the body. Ground substance varies from a watery state to a more solid gel state. This variable fluid base of ground substance combined with varying proportions of collagen fibers, cartilaginous secretions, and mineral salts, produce an array of connective tissue including ligaments, cartilage, and even bone. These various fascial layers that hold the body together are all connected to one another. They are the connective tissue that gives the body its form and shape.

Healthy connective tissue has a supple, elastic shape that can resiliently bounce back under stress. But poor nutrition, lack of water and exercise, improper posture, illness, injury and repetitive motion can take their toll, causing the connective tissues to lose their supple qualities. Over time, the fascial sheaths and collagen fibers that lie side-by-side may become packed together and adhere to each other in knotted tissues that cause limiting constriction and range of motion. They may be seen and felt in the body as pain, rotations, misalignments and distortions. Structural Integration can release these areas of chronic compression and strain by creating length and space through the many layers of fascial tissue. This helps to restore the supple qualities of the connective tissue, the rehydration of the ground substance, and opportunities for healthier metabolic activity.

In general, the work of Structural Integration is about creating length and space in the body. Length can help repair spinal curvatures of scoliosis by releasing the twists in the fascia surrounding the vertebrae. This is similar to unwinding a twisted washcloth. A practitioner does this by applying skillful pressure and stretching with cues for client

movement and breath into the adhesions of the connective tissue. The tissue will then begin to change, releasing heat and a lengthening movement where knotted tissue once was. This allows the fascial webbing throughout the body to reorganize and integrate.

In order to balance these tissues in Structural Integration, a practitioner uses a series of ten approximately ninety minute sessions which are designed to balance the cylinder of the body in a three dimensional way. That is, the right side of the body is balanced with the left side, the front of the body is balanced with the back of the body, and the core level muscles are balanced with the outer muscles. The form of applying this work is through a recipe, handed down by Dr. Ida P. Rolf. It is the culmination of many years of her research, refinement, and spiritual insight. The first seven sessions are designed to create space in the body in all of its parts. The last three sessions are integrative sessions, unique to each individual.

A practitioner of Structural Integration is there to facilitate change. Within each person is an innate wisdom that will help normalize their tissues if given the chance. A practitioner starts that process by awakening the body's own healing process. As Dr. Ida P. Rolf once said, "This is the gospel of Structural Integration: When the body gets working appropriately, the force of gravity can flow through. Then, spontaneously, the body heals itself."