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A FORTNIGHTLY GUIDE TO HEALTHY LIVING

Getting gravity to work for the body

Rolfing is a system of soft tissue manipulation that can help straighten out the body and bring it closer to its ideal centre line

GREG WILLIAMS
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

Smacking a curb in a vehicle will generally put the front wheels out of alignment. And, just like a curb smack tends to misalign a vehicle, gravity tends to distort and pull the human body out of alignment.

According to Jaret Leah and Craig Tracy, both of the Alberta Rolfing and Somatic Education Centre, and two of four Calgary-area certified Rolfers, gravity ceases to work to our advantage as we age.

"As we get older, gravity causes the body to 'sloop' and we tend to lose alignment," Leah explains.

Rolfing may help straighten out the kinks, improve flexibility and bring the body closer to its ideal centre line, an increased correlation of neck, spine and hips, thus allowing gravity to work for the body rather than against it.

Based in Boulder, Colorado, the Rolf Institute, founded in 1971, is the only school accredited to teach Rolfing. Leah and Tracy are both graduates of the Rolf Institute.

Rolfing is a system of soft tissue manipulation and body movement education, developed in the 1920s by Ida P. Rolf, a Ph.D in biochemistry. Rolf hypothesized that the body was ostensibly reshapeable, and that the fasciae — connective tissue which envelops the muscles — could be worked and formed to realign the body.

Leah uses artistic mediums to help describe Rolfing. He likens chiropractic work, with its focus on the bones, to oils. And he says massage therapy, with its focus on the muscles, is similar to painting with water colours. However, Leah says Rolfing, with its focus on tendons, ligaments and connective tissue, is akin to working with clay.

"We focus on the elasticity of the body, and the body is reshapeable," Leah ex-

plains. "We focus more on manipulation of tendons, ligaments and connective tissue."

Leah maintains that Rolfing will release stress focused in designated segments of the body, such as the arms, legs, torso or neck, from years of built-up tension. Once the tension is broken, gravity helps to realign the segments, and thus the body. Rolfers will use their fingers, hands clenched in fists, forearms or even their elbows to help stretch and manipulate the fascia.

"People sometimes think of Rolfing as deep tissue massage," Leah reports, and adds; "But I would rather say that Rolfing is not deep tissue massage, but attention to a complete tissue system."

It has been reported that Rolfing will help an individual to achieve a more youthful alignment, or as Leah says, "It helps take you back to a more youthful stance."

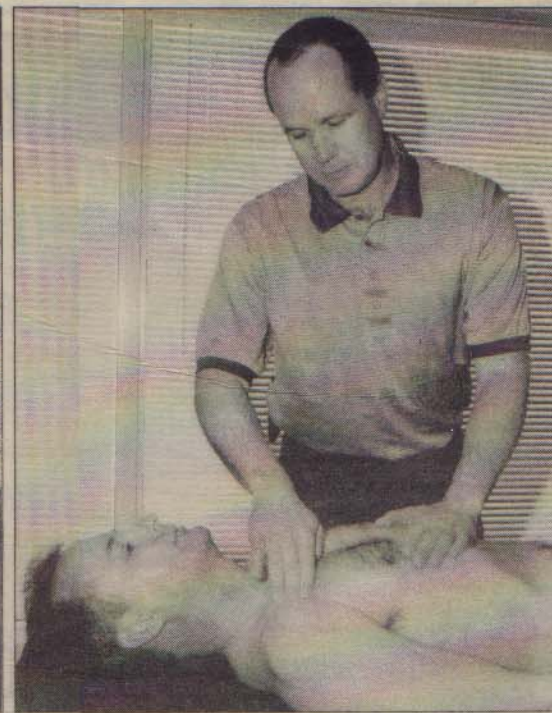
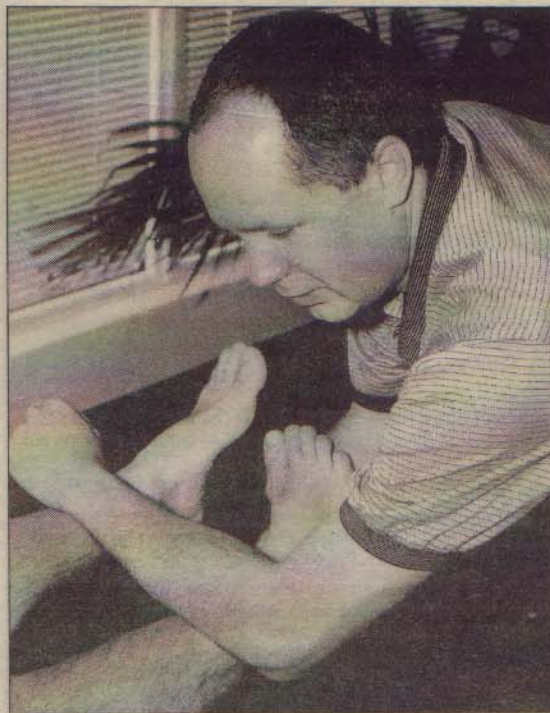
Even renowned artist Georgia O'Keeffe, one of Ida Rolf's original clients at her New York clinic, referred to the massage system as a veritable fountain of youth.

However, Leah says that 60 per cent of his clients first seek out Rolfing as a method to help them escape from chronic neck and back pain.

"Rolfing works very well for specific problems, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, or for the relief of chronic neck, shoulder or back pain," Leah says.

Although a major part of Rolfing is the hands-on physical work, Leah says educating a client about movement options is also important.

"If somebody works at a computer, and they come to me for relief of carpal tunnel, I'll ask them to show me how they sit while



Rolfer Jaret Leah, of the Alberta Rolfing and Somatic Education Centre, works on a client. Greg Williams photos, For the Calgary Herald

working at their computer. I can offer them advice, or show them a different way of doing things," Leah explains.

For those suffering chronic pain, Rolfing may provide a solution. Rolfing may also prove beneficial for those hoping to improve their everyday performance. Canadian figure skaters such as Brian Orser and Elvis Stojko credit Rolfing for improving both balance and performance.

Ida Rolf perfected her system more than 50 years ago, and her knowledge of what would best work for the body has been distilled into a template of 10 sessions. A Rolfing session usually lasts anywhere from 60 to 75 minutes, and it is suggested that 10 sessions are required for optimal results.

Leah, however, will offer his clients the option of trying a mini-series of just the first three sessions.

"After the first three sessions, though, I'll ask for a commitment to the next seven," Leah explains. "The first three sessions are essentially in preparation for the deeper

work to follow in the middle core sessions."

Leah says that Rolfing is not painful, and that a feeling of release following momentary discomfort is the most common sensation.

The standard 10 Rolfing sessions may be completed at the rate of one session per week, or spread over a period of six months. Once the 10 sessions have been completed, Leah does not recommend a client return before six months to a year.

Clients may return after the waiting period for an occasional tune-up, but Leah says once the body has been realigned — and shed of its tension — it will essentially stay that way.

"The body is enjoying its freedom, and it will take a healthier approach when shown the more optimal movement pattern," he says.

For more information on Rolfing, Leah maintains a Web site at www.rolfing-ab.com.