

The Rolfer's Digest

In 1971, American biochemist Dr. Ida Rolf founded the Rolf Institute for Structural Integration in Boulder. Some thirty years earlier, Rolf had begun developing the technique that would eventually take her name. Based upon a system of pressure and manipulation, Rolfing aims to bring the whole body into correct alignment. It's a holistic approach that may find the practitioner not just treating a sprained ankle but also working to realign a hip that has been compensating for the original ankle injury and which has in turn become subject to stress.

Institute Executive Director Diana Yourell explains, "The early faculty and administration recognized that Boulder's energy was compatible with what Ida Rolf wanted to convey about physicality and holism. Over the years, Boulder's natural beauty and receptive social and intellectual atmosphere have indeed supported and nurtured Ida Rolf's vision. Today, we claim over 1600 Certified Rolfers who practice throughout the United States and in 35 countries worldwide."

You may be forgiven for not knowing what Rolfing is. It still remains something of a mystery to many people, so I spoke with Certified Rolfer Matt Nasta to learn more.

What is Rolfing?

"I guess in some ways, it is similar to massage because it's hands-on, but it's also very different. We work more with connective tissue than just the specific muscles. We're looking at macro and micro relationships as far as is it the foot itself or is it how the knee responds to what the foot is doing? Chiropractors work more with bones and the skeleton; massage therapists work more with soft tissue. We work at either end or also in the middle, most predominantly in the middle of that."

What kind of problems might benefit from Rolfing?

“It could be someone who has a desk job. I work with University of Colorado athletes, so anyone from an inactive person to a professional athlete can benefit. A lot of people see a massage therapist in general for maintenance, prevention, or obviously relaxation. I do a lot of fix-it work. Working on athletes, they may have a race coming up on Saturday and they need to be in top shape so I have to fix whatever’s bugging them. As far as just in general, if someone has a stiff neck from looking at a computer screen all day long, that’s probably going to be more of an ongoing thing just because that’s what they do for a living everyday so motion and patterns set in.”

Could you explain what would happen in someone’s first Rolfing session?

“We’re trained to look at your body and notice certain things – how your head orients to your shoulders, how your shoulders and hips rotate, is one higher than the other? Do you bend forward? Do you have that hump back? We’re looking at three dimensional relationships: right to left, top to bottom and front to back. So before we even touch the client, that’s what we’re looking at and that’s what we can show the client. Then we’ll do the session and at the end hopefully we can show some change so it’s a good visual for them.”

Matt’s career path has led him from professional training to massage and eventually to Rolfing. He trained as a massage therapist after deciding that some physical problems needed more deep-seated treatment than he could offer through weight training alone. He then met two Rolfers who mentored him as he trained for the work that he now specializes in. The Certification training available through the Institute built upon his massage background but took it to a new level of structural integration.

“Where we differ (from massage) is that we talk about the three dimensional relationships and working on them. Rolfing has traditionally had ten sessions, so the way the students are trained is to learn Step One, Step Two, Step Three... like following a recipe. You put the pieces together with each session built from the previous one. And as you get more skilled, you use the same ten components but you might go in a different order.”

In his work, Matt has found himself having to correct many misconceptions about Rolfing:

“Unfortunately it has the reputation for being extremely painful. When it first came out in the early 70s and 80s, you had to go through this cathartic experience to change the things in your body. You had to have this emotional release to make it possible. There’s certainly some component of that in Rolfing but the training now is much more passive.... The way I work is that I try to listen to what the client’s body is telling me so it’s a compromise. I want changes to happen and I push to the margin but I try not to go over the edge into pain. It’s a process and it takes interaction with the client and myself. I’m asking and monitoring with all my senses, how are they responding to this? What is their body language telling me? It’s vocal and participatory. It’s a duel relationship.”

As well as training new practitioners, The Rolf Institute offers treatment sessions, including a discounted Student Clinic, staffed by those in the final stages of Certification. The Clinic offers an excellent introductory opportunity to learn if Rolfing might be able to help you.

To learn more about Rolfing or to find a practitioner near you, visit www.rolf.org or call (800) 530-8875.

- Fiona Young-Brown

