

Rolfing, Excruciatingly Helpful



Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times
Rey Allen tries to get a body in alignment.

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A FORMER dancer of 14 years, Anna Zahn is in touch with her body. To gain more flexibility, and to counteract some of the strain from dancing, she has tried a number of remedies: Reiki, acupuncture, yoga.



Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times
Anna Zahn, 20, a former dancer, receives a Rolfing treatment.

But she still felt tight, her body tense. So she started getting Rolfed — a kind of deep-tissue bodywork that can be so intense that some jokingly liken it to masochism.

"It's not going to massage and lighting aromatherapy candles," said Ms. Zahn, a 20-year-old student at New York University, who gets a Rolfing treatment every week or so. "It's tough to go to these sessions. It's painful, very painful, emotionally and physically. But you feel such a relief when you leave that it's just the most amazing feeling."

Others are feeling it, too. Popular in the 1970s, Rolfing once evoked hairy-chested, New Age types seeking alternative therapies — perhaps most famously spoofed in the 1977 football movie "Semi-Tough," starring Burt Reynolds and Kris Kristofferson.

But today, Rolfing is experiencing something of a resurgence, especially among younger city dwellers for whom the novelty of yoga has worn off, and who are now seeking more intense ways to relieve the stresses of modern life.

"Back in the day, Rolfing's growth was word of mouth," said Rey Allen, a Rolfing practitioner in lower Manhattan, who has noticed an increase in its popularity. He attributes the rise partly to the Internet, which has introduced the treatment to a new generation.

"Over half of my clientele are in their 20s," he added. "Since I opened my practice in the city a few years ago, the average age of my clientele has always been 35. But that has drastically changed since the summer."

Could Rolfing be one Madonna endorsement away from becoming the next Pilates?

Rolfing is named after its creator, Ida Rolf, a biochemist from New York City who studied alternative methods of bodywork and healing beginning in the 1920s. She died in 1979 at the age of 82.

Dr. Rolf developed a theory that the body's aches and pains arose from basic imbalances in posture and alignment, which were created and reinforced over time by gravity and learned responses among muscles and fascia — the sheath-like connective tissue that surrounds and binds muscles together. Rolfing developed as a way to "restructure" muscles and fascia.

The focus on manipulating fascia is part of what distinguishes it from chiropractics, which deals with bones, and from therapeutic massages, which works on muscles.

That also explains why Rolfing has a reputation for being aggressive, even painful at times. Fascia is stubborn material, particularly if it is marked by knots and scar tissue. Rolfers gouge with knuckles and knead with fists, contort limbs and lean into elbows to loosen tendons and ligaments. Patients, meanwhile, need the fortitude to relax and take it during the hourlong sessions.

Russell Poses, a 39-year-old international equities trader on Wall Street, who started getting Rolfing treatments after injuring his back, likened the experience to "paying \$150 an hour for an Indian burn." But the benefits, as far as he's concerned, are well worth it. Chiropractors and years of physical therapy couldn't accomplish what two or three Rolfing sessions did, he said.

Plus, he said he could still feel the results two weeks later. "It's something that actually lasts," he said.

It is hard to find reliable statistics on the prevalence of Rolfing. But the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration, which was founded by Dr. Rolf in 1971 to educate and certify practitioners, says it has noticed a rise in student enrollments at its Boulder, Colo., headquarters.

Kevin McCoy, a faculty member at the institute with a practice in Milwaukee, said he had seen annual class sizes swell to 100 from 75 students in recent years. In the mid-1980s, he said, the school graduated fewer than 50 a year. Despite the bad economy, he said, "our numbers have been maintaining or growing."

An endorsement in 2007 on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" by the cardiac surgeon Dr. Mehmet Oz certainly didn't hurt. Now the host of the syndicated daytime program "The Dr. Oz Show," he says he sees the growing popularity of Rolfing as "a general perception by the public that taking medications for discomfort is not giving you the panacea benefits that you would desire."

In that regard, he said he viewed the treatment as an extension of practices like yoga, which also offers relief without drugs. "Yoga is in many ways analogous to Rolfing because it takes tendons and it stretches them into a position of discomfort," Dr. Oz said. "They're just doing it for you without your doing it yourself."

Rolfing practitioners say they have also noticed a shift that may explain why younger clients are seeking out their services. It's not just to treat injuries, but also stress. "Health is one area where we can find a sense of control," said Mr. Allen, who has been practicing for about nine years. "The real trend is that people are starting to look within the boundaries of their own skin for meaning in their lives, and to find a sense of security in the world."

As with other holistic practices, Rolfing seems to leave the door open for a certain mysticism. Even those who have little use for New Age-type practices like meditation can verge on the metaphysical when discussing Rolfing.

Beau Buffier, a 35-year-old partner at a corporate law firm in New York, says he started Rolfing treatments after he injured his neck and shoulder in a fall. Despite three M.R.I.'s, surgery, physical therapy, a chiropractor, acupuncture and deep massage, the pain remained. Stress from his high-stakes job didn't help.

But somehow Rolfing did the trick. "It's dealing with the physical manifestations of something that's kind of emotional or spiritual," Mr. Buffier said.

He has since gotten in touch with his body in other ways. He began exercising more and eating better. He lost 20 pounds. His blood pressure dropped. "It's almost as if your body locks up emotions," he said.