

## Balancing The Body

Rebecca Jones

For a child wobbling atop a two-wheel bicycle for the first time, getting it to remain upright is a scary challenge. But once that child has mastered the art of balancing on the bike, the body just remembers what to do. That's the way it is with balance. Our body has lots of tools at its disposal to help us control our upright posture, and these tools function largely at the subconscious level.

However, when one of those tools fails to work properly, our system of balance can get out of whack. Problems with our feet and neurological conditions, such as Parkinson's disease, can throw off our balance. Eye conditions can rob us of stereoscopic vision, which helps us

Bodywork can help. Certain modalities can improve and restore balance, particularly through reeducating the body in the most efficient ways to move. Just like our bodies once learned the best way to stabilize atop a bicycle, they can also learn new, better ways to stabilize aging feet and legs. Here's a look at how two bodywork modalities--structural integration and the Feldenkrais Method--may help.

### Structural Integration

Jane Elmore, MD, is a champion dressage rider, which means she spends much of her day perched atop a 1,200-pound prancing horse. Her safety absolutely depends on keeping her



Reeducate your body and bring balance.

properly locate ourselves in space. And, of course, inner ear problems can greatly affect our balance.

Many of these balance-affecting conditions are related to aging. In fact, it's estimated that one of every three people older than 65 will suffer some kind of fall this year. And half those people will fall again within 12 months.

balance. She's been doing dressage for more than 10 years, but she's found the greatest success in her sport most recently. She credits her improvement to structural integration sessions.

"I just feel so much more secure in the saddle now," says Elmore, who owns a

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ranch in Denison, Texas. "They talk about the rider being a dance partner with the horse in dressage. Well, I was never a dancer. I was always overweight. But what I find now, in order to have this horse be able to respond to you, you have to be subtle in being able to shift weight from a left seat bone to a right seat bone, to both seat bones, to rotate in the seat so your shoulders follow the horse's shoulders. All this is much easier for me now, simply because I'm much freer in my movements."

Structural integration is based on the work of Dr. Ida Rolf, a biochemist who founded the modality called Rolfing, as well as the Rolf Institute in Boulder, Colorado, in 1971. Structural integration involves manipulating the body's connective tissue--the fascia--to rebalance the body and bring about pain relief from stress and injury.

"Most people come to structural integration because they've got something that hurts and can't make it better," says Marilyn Beech, past executive director and president of the board of the International Association of Structural Integrators. "But structural integration isn't really so much about getting rid of the pain as it is about getting the body lined up again. A lot of times your body is so misaligned you can't get your center of gravity over your foot. A lot of structural integrators work with athletes. It's common that afterward, they'll feel more coordinated, more efficient in their movements, and they'll have better balance."

## Feldenkrais

Like structural integration, the Feldenkrais Method improves balance by teaching individuals to be more aware of proper movement. Developed by Ukrainian-born physicist Moshe Feldenkrais, the method stems from Feldenkrais' study of judo and its emphasis on perfect balance. Promoters say the method can help people experiencing pain in the back, neck, shoulders, hips, legs, or knees, but is also useful for healthy individuals, particularly athletes, who want to move more freely.

"Unlike physical therapy or occupational therapy, Feldenkrais is an educational process," says Denver practitioner Sissel Rhyme. "It works with the central

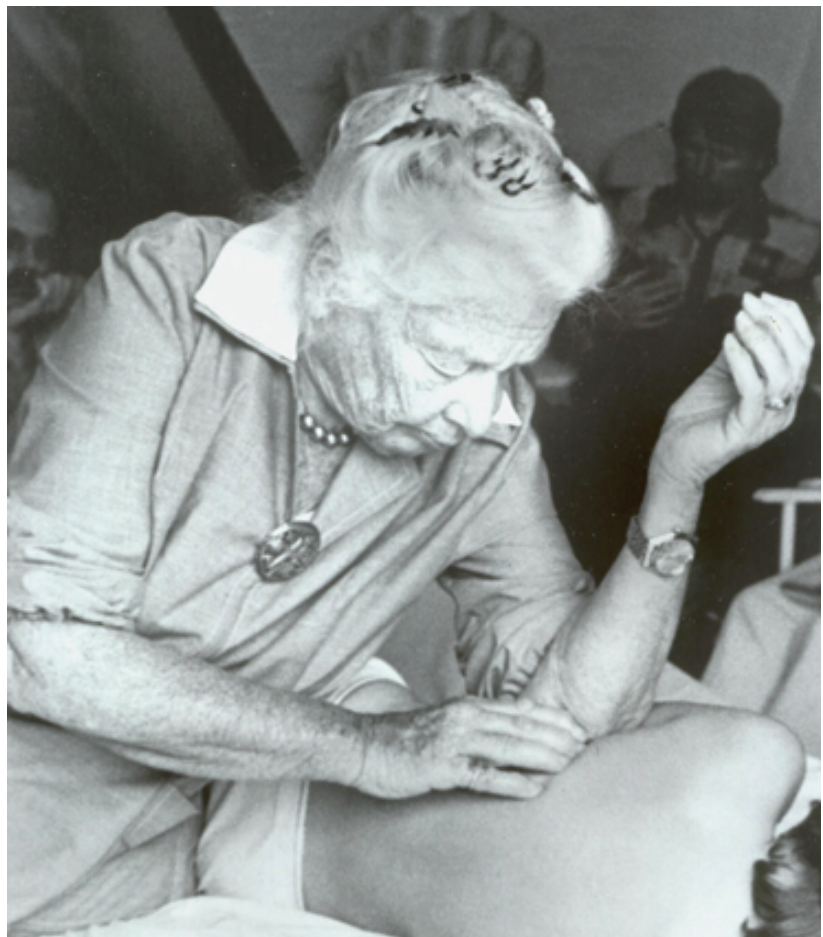
nervous system. It's bones to brain." Rhyme typically leads students through a sequence of precise movements, either sitting or lying on the floor, standing, or sitting in a chair. Throughout the process, she asks students to think about how various positions feel.

"This is intelligent exercise," she says. "You have to be a part of it mentally. It's not like being on the treadmill for 30 minutes where it doesn't matter what you think about." By increasing the awareness of how it feels to move properly, with everything structurally balanced, students can learn to let go of old patterns of movement and develop new ones that result in improved flexibility and coordination.

There are literally hundreds of such movement lessons, which vary in difficulty and complexity. Lessons can be 30-60 minutes long and can be done

in groups or privately with an instructor. The instructor will touch the students, but only gently and noninvasively. It's not at all painful or strenuous, though Rhyme reports students may find themselves exhausted after an hour. Studies have shown that 10 weeks worth of Feldenkrais lessons leads to notable improvements not just in balance, but also in the participants' sense of confidence in their ability to balance.

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**Ida Rolf, the founder of Rolfing.**

# Happiness is Contagious

Maybe mom was right. Research suggests that surrounding yourself with friends and family who are happy can actually increase your own happiness.

Scientists at Harvard University and the University of California, San Diego, found that emotions, particularly happiness, have a viral effect in how they spread from one person to another. For every happy person in your physical social network, you have a 9 percent chance of increasing your own happiness. The effect is more pronounced the closer someone is to you geographically, and it does not seem to include electronic communications. The study, "Dynamic Spread of Happiness in a Large Social Network," can be found online in the British Medical Journal ([www.bmj.com](http://www.bmj.com)).

This is especially good news considering the potential health benefits of happiness and positivity. A study published in Stroke magazine has indicated a "significant association"

between optimism and a reduced risk of stroke. This is in addition to studies that have linked optimism to a healthier immune system, faster wound healing, and a lower risk of heart disease. While the exact cause of the benefits is not clear, one theory is that optimistic people are more likely to take care of their health. In addition, there is hope that teaching optimism could become part of a preventative program for various conditions.

What's one way to get happy? Try massage! Exposure to stress, a contributing factor to unhappiness, over a long period of time can increase the rate of neural degeneration and increase the risk for Alzheimer's disease. Luckily, a study from Umea University in Sweden has shown that just five minutes of massage has the potential to lower stress, and 80 minutes of massage has a tremendously positive effect on stress levels. Get massage, get happy, and cheer up your friends and family!



Surrounding yourself with happy people is healthy!

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## Boost Your Immune System

### Lymphatic Drainage Therapy Fights Infection

Does your immune system work overtime? If so, you might want to give it a boost by seeing a massage therapist or bodyworker trained in lymphatic drainage therapy. This technique can boost your immunity by increasing the production of antibodies, stimulating circulation, moving congestion out of the body, and reducing swelling, especially after surgery.

The lymphatic system supports our body's immune function and involves several organs, glands, and tissues, hundreds of lymph nodes, and a network of vessels. A clear lymph fluid flows through these vessels and carries the metabolic waste (bacteria, dead cells, fats, fluids, proteins, and viruses) to the lymph nodes, where it is filtered. These nodes often swell when we are sick.

The lymphatic drainage techniques used by massage therapists and bodyworkers gently stimulate lymph nodes, help correct swelling and stagnation in those nodes, reduce local fluid retention, boost the overall immune system, and provide relaxation. As an essential tool in the treatment of lymphedema (excess lymphatic fluid), this therapy is often applied postoperatively and can be especially beneficial for breast cancer patients.

Administering this treatment requires advanced training and is performed with gentle, massage-like strokes. There should be no discomfort involved; in fact, you may feel you are hardly being worked on at all.

#### Aftercare

After your lymphatic drainage

treatment, it's possible you could feel some mild, flu-like symptoms, depending on how much strain your body has been under prior to treatment. This strain may be due to environmental pollutants, medication, and diet. Most people leave a session simply feeling relaxed, but if you don't feel at the top of your game, drink plenty of water, limit your salt intake, and stay physically active.

Lymphatic drainage is one way to give your wellness a boost in a busy world that makes many demands on your immune system.

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