

Ask the Faculty

Self-Care for Rolfers™

Q *I've been practicing Rolwing® for several years now, and was wondering if you could give me some advice regarding self-care. Areas that have come up for me include: minor aches and pains in my arms and hands that seems to be progressing a bit, taking on clients' energy during sessions, and feeling drained at the end of a long workday. Any guidance you can offer in these or other areas of self-care for Rolfers would be welcome.*

A I find that if I take several clients in a row without taking time for myself to recover (ten minutes break between clients, healthy activities after a workday), I feel my energy has been drained. But what seems worse to me is to feel in a continuous hurry, which makes me stressed, in situations like being late with one client, not being able to catch up with the next one, not being able to make a necessary phone call, or having to rush after finishing my work. I would recommend you get to the office comfortably ahead of time, take some time to center yourself and recover between sessions, do healthy activities after work and have pleasurable relationships. Also, I would recommend making peace with your aging process: ten years ago my body could take many more clients in a day. Now it is time for listening to how much my body and mind can take and doing it in the most pleasurable and nurturing way.

Cornelia Rossi
Certified Advanced Rolfer,
Rolfing Instructor,
Fascial Anatomy Instructor

A As in most professions, you are your most valuable tool. It is crucial that you take care of yourself. Additionally, the quality of your touch is a reflection of your inner state when you practice, which is partly a function of your health and well-being. I find that it is essential for longevity in my practice (thirty-nine years), and my development as a Rolfer, that I cultivate my personal practice of yoga and *chi gung*, along with aerobic exercise. You need a practice that will develop your capacity for concentration, inner sensitivity,

strength and endurance. Energetic practices are important for me, as access to inner energetic flows comes naturally. Your practice should be based on your inner talents, proclivities and resources. I almost always end my day with forty-five minutes of my practice. It is better than a margarita.

Taking on clients' "energy" during sessions is a boundary problem and is one of the most profound issues we deal with as Rolfers. It is difficult to address briefly, as it often has to do with the way Rolfers perceive. I am an introvert and work from a deeply internal space. I will often, during a session, focus on an inner state I have cultivated over the years and rest there. It is a familiar place for me and securely grounded. It also allows me to open to subtle sensations and "intuitions" that guide my decision-making during a session. But most importantly, it is familiar and connected to more "archetypal" or universal sources of support. From this space it is possible to perceive my client's vulnerabilities, injuries and trauma without being involved in them. I am filled with my own presence. As they say: "A good offense is the best defense." Being fully present to your own space makes it clear what is problematic in your client.

I could rephrase all this and say simply that being perceptually present to the space you are in and connected to the ground will give you a clear sense of what is you and what is not, which is always the issue if you are being overly affected by your clients' suffering. The problem is that it is not actually that simple.

Being tired at the end of the day is a consequence of the "complex" work of

Rolfing. Rolfing requires immense presence, concentration, compassion, knowledge, strength and dexterity, which at the end of the day leaves us tired but satisfied, knowing that we have not wasted our time. Feeling drained is usually a consequence of losing our sense of appropriate boundaries, which I have discussed above.

Michael J. Salvesson
Certified Advanced Rolfer,
Advanced Rolfing Instructor

A **On physical aspects:** In my first couple of years as a Rolfer, I did not take any systematic approach in supporting my own body for the demands of giving many Rolfing sessions. Inspired by my review of the literature on connective-tissue remodeling, that attitude has changed. With the half-life cycle of collagen being approximately twelve months, I know that it is easily possible to build a strong and elastic fascial body, provided that one regularly stimulates the fascial fibroblasts over a period of six to thirty-six months. The key being gradual load increases, at very small increments, with appropriate rest in between. Good examples are martial artists who have developed an amazing fascial strength, usually by training and loading their fascia two to three times a week over many months and years.

With my fingers having been the weakest part of my body during strenuous Rolfing sessions, I therefore started to do modified push-ups on my fingertips – first putting only a small portion of my body weight on them, and then increasing the loading every few months. The same applied to doing pull-ups on a doorframe, beginning again with only a small portion of the body weight. As tactile sensitivity is diminished for a few minutes afterwards, I usually practice these one-minute exercises at the very end of a Rolfing day, yet only two times a week.

I have the same philosophy in scheduling my session slots over the years: I found that it's best for my body to work two longer days per week, with one or two easy days (with no sessions or only very few sessions) in between. I remember having had painful body responses after increasing my maximum session load erratically from one month to the next. Following the martial arts philosophy of gradual load increases, I then planned this more systematically and went on to adding

just one more session to my maximum daily load every couple of years. Today, after more than thirty years of giving Roling sessions, I am treating clients two days a week only, yet with ten sessions of an hour length on each of those days, and with one day of rest in between those two days, as well as a long four-day rest over the weekend. The remaining days of the week are then free for my research work at the fascia lab, which is very different body usage than during my session days. I am convinced that had I followed a more erratic development of my session load, my hands would have acquired some aging “wear and tear” symptoms by now, and I would probably have bouts of wishing for “Roling retirement” once in a while. Yet fascia is not like a car tire that gets used up over time. It is an amazingly responsive biological tissue: depending on how we load it, we can wear it down, or we can build it up. I have profited from that insight tremendously.

On energetic aspects: I must confess that I find the concept of a certain quantity of negative energy being taken over from one person (who is subsequently “relieved”) to another person (who subsequently feels burdened) not at all convincing. Particularly in the light of modern scientific insights on the function of mirror neurons and their role in human empathy, the “energy transmission analogy” is no longer suitable for me. Like many other therapists, I tend to have very active mirror neurons when being with another person. When watching a James Bond movie for example, my skeletal trunk muscles tend to shiver out of excitement to such a degree that I often feel like suppressing it or hiding it from the person next to me. A less dramatic yet similar empathetic process happens in my sessions: my breathing, vitality, and emotional state change from one client to the next. And the physiological changes in my body may be as significant as if first watching a horror movie, then a great comedy, and finally a heart-throbbing historical love drama. What happens in my body has little to do with the “energy” of the physical cinema screen in front of me. And the feelings in my body when seeing James Bond hanging over a cliff are probably also different from those of the real movie actor (who may have stood on a wooden post in a Hollywood studio, pretending to hang miles above a canyon).

Reading the excellent book *The Body Has a Mind of its Own* by Blakeslee and Blakeslee has been very inspiring for me. It helped me to understand that it is my neo-mammalian cortex that actively tries to guess what the functional and emotional qualities of a perceived posture or movement are for another person (and filling in many blank spots in order to arrive at a “congruent picture”). And then my brain actively anticipates how I would feel if I were in this person’s skin, yet with my own body history and personal life story as a background. I am sure that my own visceral reactions in response to a client’s expressions may often be shaped by distorted projections and interpretations similar to their function in a movie theater. And yet, they can also give me very valuable input for what the great neurologist Antonio Damasio calls the “somatic markers” in my own sensorial advisory system, in order to refine my intuition.

Reading a few recent research papers concerning empathy and mirror neurons convinced me that the degree and direction of somatic empathy can be drastically shaped by clever circumstances and conditioning. Given the right setup, most people can be seduced to have “out of body perceptions” or to “live” in somebody else’s limbs (See e.g.: V.I. Petkova and H.H. Ehrsson’s “If I Were You: Perceptual Illusion of Body Swapping,” *PLoS One* 3:12, 2008). That fascinating background inspired me to experiment more creatively with my own mirror neurons during sessions. Over the last two years this led to what I now call the CAKE technique: “Constructive Anticipatory Kinesthetic Empathy.” Let me briefly explain: Rather than emotionally merging with my clients, or “keeping my distance,” I now focus on a specific combination of self-sensing and kinesthetic empathy. Before touching my client at a new place I ask myself: “Where is this same place in my own body?,” “How can I be more present there?,” and “Am I able to anticipate kinesthetically in my own body the particular state of release (or warmth, letting go, vitality, postural integration, connectedness, wellness, etc.) that I hope to induce in my client in this area?”

Being slightly dyslexic, it took me initially a second or two to locate my left knee before touching my client’s left knee, as an example. Yet now it takes me less than a second to locate it, followed by another one to three seconds for “connecting” with that

region internally and to induce a positive anticipated kinesthetic sensation. The side effects of this practice for my own posture and well-being are very beneficial. If I have a day with many leg-oriented sessions, then I end up with very happy legs and feet in my own body at the end of the day. Similarly with my shoulders, lower back, neck; you name it. I also believe that this helps my clients’ mirror neurons in taking over some of the beneficial tissue and body changes that they subconsciously perceive in my body and in our physical communication.

What motivated me to sit down and contribute these impressions for this journal column is the vivid report of a Rolfer colleague sharing her experience with the CAKE technique yesterday. Having learned this technique in a workshop a few months ago, she reported that she now feels energized and “well” at the end of her session days. Yet in addition she also achieved a full practice for the first time, which she is convinced is due to how differently her clients perceive her and her touch in their sessions. Needless to say, I am very happy to hear that, as practicing the CAKE technique also continues to be of great value in my personal Roling practice.

**Robert Schleip Ph.D.
Certified Advanced Rolfer,
Roling Instructor,
Fascial Anatomy Instructor**

A Achy hands and arms might mean you are pushing, rather than “sinking” and letting the tissue come to you before you sink deeper. Take your time – slow down. I think it takes a long time to let go of the perceptions of what you think the clients “expect” from you. Don’t overwork time-wise in a part of the body or session, and take your hands completely off the client frequently. Move your wrists and fingers around the way you would stretch and work an ankle that is tight. In between clients, I stretch my hands on the wall, open fingered – I reach and stretch my shoulder joints, drink lots of water and never schedule in a way that doesn’t give me at least ten to fifteen minutes to myself. Get real on how many clients you need versus how many you “love” doing. What is your ideal number each day, and if it supports you financially, that is great. Be careful that you are not talking a lot during sessions or using the clients as a

social moment for yourself, as that can end up draining you. I find that when I can be completely present and quiet internally, use my hands efficiently and deeply, Rolfling is actually a resting place for me compared to everything else in life.

Valerie Berg
Certified Advanced Rolfler,
Rolfling Instructor

A It's important to work from a "spacious perspective." Much of what we do is help to reestablish spaciousness in our clients. We need to have our own spaciousness to communicate this to our clients and to have our interventions be most effective. When we work from this perspective, we will tend to have much less compression into our own body (hands, arms).

We do three things in Rolfling – hydrate, differentiate/de-rotate, and integrate. I believe our profession (all of manual therapy) has valued focusing a lot of pressure into the tissue in order for it to hydrate or change. Let me offer another point of view. What if hydration of the tissue is more easily accomplished with a more evoking touch? I believe that the inherent health of the system is hardwired to move toward hydration. My experience is that touch that invites the tissue to expand and express spaciousness (palintonicity) is more effective, is easier on both my body and the client's body, and is more integrative.

Some ways to do this include:

Imagine/allow your body and its field to take up more space. Begin by imaging/allowing yourself to fill up about two to three feet of space around you. A simple way to begin this is to keep finding your back – allow your back to move away from your hands as you widen the field of awareness around you. It is important to attend to your grounding as well. Be aware of your feet resting with weight on the ground. Breathe. Ground and feel space.

Begin by practicing outside of a session. You can also practice while you're doing your intake or your pre-session catching up on what's happened since the last session. Breathe and pay attention to your back. Be aware of the field around you. Feel your feet and ischial tuberosities resting on their surfaces.

Keep in mind that if you want to work deeper, you actually need to "back up." If I focus (take my whole self) deeply into my client's body as I work deeper with increasing pressure, there is often a physical and energetic resistance making the deep work more uncomfortable and less effective for both myself and my client, as well as compressing my hands and arms. Your client will often respond more readily if you invite the tissue to expand and rehydrate through a lighter more evoking touch.

This may challenge your ideas about deep work. If so, great. Don't believe me unless you experience it. Don't underestimate the power of a wide perceptual field!

Look with a soft focus versus a pointed gaze. Notice your peripheral vision. Find your back.

Focus on the palms of your hands with fingers being extensions from there. As much as possible include your palms in your contact and use as much of the whole hand as you can. The palm includes the "eye of the hand" (EOH) and has a direct connection into the interosseous membrane and by extension into the thoracic core. As you "work" from the EOH, allow/imagine that there is space in your joints, hand and the interosseous membrane.

Of course, your own body mechanics are important. Work through your shoulders, not from your shoulders. Have your hands express from your heart through your lateral line. Keep your scapulae on your back versus allowing them to follow your hands. Let your scapulae and your elbows have weight. Keep your feet, pelvis, and sit bones in your attention as you do this. You may want to have a colleague guide or give you feedback in your body mechanics.

Pay attention to the pacing of your client's tissue response. Notice if you're forcing the tissue or coaxing. Inviting it to hydrate vs. making it hydrate. Have patience. "Listen" with your hands and being. Hold the perspective that you are a catalyst for change, not the change.

It's OK to pay more attention to yourself than your client for much of the session. Where you are in your body/perception/self-awareness has a huge impact on the tissue response. Experiment. Realize that

your client's system is tracking you as you work with him. He will reflect the ease in your system and relax in his own.

Don't attempt to integrate all of these suggestions at once. Pick one and work with it, experiment with it. Then move to another.

Thomas Walker
Certified Advanced Rolfler,
Rolfling Instructor

A Your question comes at the cusp of the point in your career where you can find ways to make Rolfling a long-term lifestyle or you could find yourself with increasing aches and pains that limit your time in the practice. I'm happy that you are asking these questions now. Several ingredients are important in Rolfler self-care. They parallel the wholistic nature of the work. There are physical strategies, energetic strategies, and psychological strategies. I will limit my discussion to primarily physical strategies.

First, you need to get Rolfling from other practitioners to keep your own structure free from the repetitive stresses that a busy practice puts on your body. This should include both structural work and also an exploration of how you are using your body when you work that is contributing to any strain patterns you may be perceiving or that you may be entrenching in your system below your level of awareness.

Second, you may be ready, if you have not already, to upgrade to an electric table, which will allow you to spend more of your session time with the table at an optimal height for the specific task. For example, I like to have the table at a much different height for doing neck work or foot work than for doing hamstring work. And you'll find working with clients in sidelying positions can be much easier when you can bring the relevant structures to you.

Finally, you need to commit yourself to continuously exploring your own body use as you work. This is related to getting good structural and functional work to open your awareness to your patterns, of course. It is also a practice in and of itself. The practice is to put your own embodiment in the front of your awareness while you work (as opposed to needing to "get" that tissue/structure/pattern in your client). This means that you are consistently tracking your own sensation as you work: "Do I feel comfortable? Am I shortening my structure

somewhere? Is there freedom in my core right now? Am I breathing? Am I holding somewhere? What is my connection to ground like right now? Am I aware of the space in the room and outside the room?"

It is my experience that using a couple of simple concepts of movement will help to organize my body use in a way that keeps me comfortable and thereby facilitates the work. First, I endeavor to use contralateral movement whenever possible.

That means that if I am working in tissue, usually pushing away from myself, with my right hand (right hand forward from my midline) I am using my right foot to stabilize or to push from a position behind my midline. That may sound complex, but really, it is just the movement of walking. When one arm is anterior, the leg on that side is posterior and vice versa. This sets the body up biomechanically for forces to travel through the body without creating undue strain.

Second, I work with the principle of palintonicity. I work in a way that keeps multidirectional length through the

system, especially the core structures. In talking about core structures I include the interosseous membranes of the arms and legs as well as the palmar fascias. There is not room in this forum to address all the various biomechanical relationships that one might explore in turn, but instead let this be a general approach. Your Rolfer or Rolf Movement Practitioner™ can help in illuminating the specifics of your pattern with you.

Finally, I find that keeping my base of support both grounded and in alignment with the direction of my movement helps to facilitate good body use. In other words, if the vector of my input is at a sixty-degree angle to the edge of the table, I line my body up with this vector, rather than trying to twist to accommodate the vector while I stand at a right angle (or any other) to the table. You may have been introduced to this in your training as the rocker concept. It means that as we project in a direction, we are best served to roll through the base of support (the feet, knees, or pelvis when sitting) in that same direction. Another tip

to maximizing the support of your base is to watch the tendency to lean onto the edge of the table, which effectively makes the table your "ground" and decreases your support and leverage.

By working in these ways – allowing your own sensation at the forefront of your awareness, moving in contralateral motion, and maintaining core length – you may find several benefits. First, some of those aches and pains will be reduced or disappear; second, you may find that you are more able to perceive your client's system; third, you may find that you don't need to work as "hard" to effect change in your client. This, in turn, should leave you with a little more energy at the end of the session/day. Another benefit of keeping your own sensation in the forefront is that you may begin to notice when you are overworking or taking on your client's energy or agenda more quickly and be able to take measures to interrupt that process.

Duffy Allen
Certified Advanced Rolfer,
Rolfing Instructor