# Dissection of a Fascial Stretch

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**Abstract**

This article was written in the spirit of contributing to the growing awareness, promotion, discussion, and research of 'fascial fitness' by the structural integration (SI) and Fascia Research Congress (FRC) community in general and by Robert Schleip and Thomas Myers in particular. As an important component of fascial fitness, it is my intention to cut a little deeper into the subject of self-stretching so that the reader may draw enough benefit to add this to their current repertoire of strategies for self-care and client-care.

While this article can stand alone, I recommend going back to the *2011 Yearbook of Structural Integration* and read (or re-read) both my article titled "Fascial Stretch Therapy and SI: New innovations for practice" (p. 59) and "Fascial Fitness: Fascia oriented training for bodywork and movement therapies" (p. 68) by Divo G. Müller and Robert Schleip. Those articles contain highly relevant content that enriches this article's focus on fascial self-stretching.

**The Science**

Since there is evidence in research both for (Meroni et al., 2010) and against stretching (Shrier et al. 2000), perhaps these findings point not to the question of whether one should stretch, but rather to what the correct techniques and optimal parameters are for best outcomes, if assisted stretching and self-stretching are to be integrated in our SI practice. Müller and Schleip, in the previously noted article, give ample scientific references and personal clinical experience as a movement and manual therapist respectively, suggesting that stretching is crucial to maintaining properly functioning fascia. However, they point to evidence in research that may help underpin and guide us in our own practice of fascial fitness as well as when we suggest specific activities for our clients. For example, they suggest that stretching dynamically is more effective at bringing about the desired results of optimal mobility and flexibility, instead of stretching statically.

Therefore, if we look to Schleip—unarguably one of the leaders in fascial research and an advanced practitioner of SI—for some of the answers on optimally stretching fascia, we can consider some of the parameters he and Müller have drawn up in that article. In the following list, I have paraphrased those authors and have focused on those factors most relevant to stretching:

- Most soft tissue injuries occur in the connective tissue due to overload of capacity.
- Optimal elasticity and resiliency are signs of a healthy, youthful fascial body.
- Specific training (like stretching) can positively affect fascia remodeling (i.e., both form and function benefit).
- Much functional movement occurs by the lengthening and shortening of fascial elements, not muscles.
- Fascial fibroblasts should be stimulated by actively loading tissue over multiple extension ranges while using elastic spring-like oscillations while moving (or stretching).
- Flowing, dynamic stretching, both fast and slow, is preferred over static stretching.
- Shear, gliding, and tensioning motions in superficial fascial membranes with considerable individual variety and creativity create optimal proprioceptive refinement.

**A Look at Self-Fascial-Stretching**

Serving both as a metaphor for what represents principles of effective fascial stretching and as an example of a beneficial stretch to give to clients, here is a basic analysis of one movement-based stretch. It encompasses most, if not all, of the criteria for optimal stretching as a component of fascial fitness expressed

***Figure 1: Starting position, begin with hands down by sides.***

in the previously mentioned article by Müller and Schleip.

There is good and ample reason to start stretching the Superficial Front Line of the body, as this is the very line we start with in SI. For many who sit at a desk and/or computer all day, this movement-based stretch is exactly what they need to decompress and remodel fascia that has wrinkled and shortened while sitting. It goes without saying that all of us with SI practices who remain flexed a good portion of the day could use this as well. So I invite you to try this moving stretch for your benefit as well as for those you see in session.

The antidote to sitting, of course, is first to stand, which in and of itself begins the process of decompression of the spinal discs and diaphragm, re-arrangement of collagen fibers, and re-hydration, displacement, and re-organization of blood, lymph, synovial fluid, and the extra-cellular matrix.

Schleip, in his article, gives credit to ancient forms of fascial fitness, including martial arts, and for good reason. The first photo shows me in a modified taiji stance called wuji, which starts with feet slightly turned inward, which gently raises the foot arches. It also rotates knees and hips into a little, comfortable internal rotation. Accompanied by slightly flexed, "springy" knees, this position also partially opens the sacroiliac (SI) joints such that those joints and the lumbosacral spine are decompressed, allowing the sacrum to freely "swing" along all of its many axes of rotation between the ilia during movement. Adjustments can be easily made to stabilize any joint (e.g. SI joint) that may feel unstable and/or painful. The client then is asked just to stand and experience this position, which for many is novel. Despite what the photo depicts, one may actually keep arms hanging loosely down, or as one of my qigong teachers said, "Let them hang like strings by your sides."

Cue your client to breathe where they do not and you will start to see them spontaneously sway, sometimes slightly and at other times quite largely. (It may help to have them close their eyes if they don't sway.) Some clients enjoy this silent, organic, and natural movement; other cerebral types will ask for an explanation to which you might simply reply, "It's normal. Enjoy, close your eyes, and just breathe." (Some need eyes open for fear they may fall.) In my many years of personal experience performing this first part, as well as observing students, patients and clients, there is an oscillatory sway that occurs. At times it is even, gentle, and symmetrical; at other times it can be quite the contrary, even transforming into a phenomenon of violent shaking. If one allows this to occur and does not resist or stop, then the natural, individualized manifestation of one's rhythmical, gentle, tide-like sway reassuringly returns, usually

***Figure 2: Add slow, gentle pulses of dynamic extension.***

with a comforting sigh or yawn that confirms the therapeutic effects of this exercise.

Fascial fitness criteria check so far: We have springy, oscillating knees; undulating sacrum and spine; and a natural sway, which oscillates, undulates, and refines the individual's proprioception. So far, so good.

The second photo shows me leaning back a little into extension, but this is not static—a no-no in fascial fitness—rather it is quite dynamic, as we will see next.

***Figure 3: Progress extension synchronized with the breath.***

From the start position of arms down, slowly bend elbows, and let your hands slide up your sides to place your palms on the gluteus maximus region with fingers pointing to the floor and your hypothenar area as close to the ilium side of the SI joint as you can, in order to feel a slight stretch in your chest/pectoral area (photo 2). This also stretches the carpal tunnel and wrist flexors. You may assist this with gently bringing your elbows back, too, but remember not to overload anything or it becomes traditional, localized or isolated stretching and not the extended feeling you get from stretching the fascia. When you get that 'fascial feeling,' release all holding or tension in all body parts. Inhale, then gently push hands in toward the front and simultaneously down toward your toes (something like a 45-degree angle) as you slowly exhale. This helps you to fulcrum or lever your torso off your pelvis such that your abdominals gently stiffen with support and stability, while simultaneously helping you to traction and decompress your spine.

Now synchronize and pace your breathing—inhale in the start position, exhale as you lift and lean back, inhale coming forward, and so on. With repetition comes refinement and improvement both in quantity and quality, but always monitor yourself (and then your client) not to overload movement, stretch or breath. The actual stretch movement is a lift, glide and lean, with pulsing, undulating and oscillating to the extent that you find your innate rhythm, tempo, and range of motion that is pain-free and self-perpetuating. Stop when you reach your natural end point of free motion or if you start getting a feeling of fatigue in the tissue being stretched. Definitely stop the movement before you over-extend and start to compress tissues in the opposite direction (photo 3).

For more variety, creativity, and proprioceptive refinement, add hip shifts and pelvic circles. Start small and slow and progress in range and speed as your ability and need dictate (photo 4).

Last fascial fitness criteria check: In addition to meeting the previous criteria, we added specific training of fibroblasts (extension) to counteract the pathology of shortening (flexion); focused on lengthening fascial elements, not muscle; actively loaded tissue over multiple extension ranges while using elastic spring-like oscillations; moved with flowing, dynamic stretches, both fast and slow; used shear, gliding, and tensioning motions in superficial fascial membranes with individual variety and creativity for optimal proprioceptive refinement. Looks to me like we're on our way toward fascial fitness.

***Figure 4: Progress from smaller to larger hip circles.***

Final thoughts on this movement:

- Start with small movements and gentle breaths, especially if you have been sitting for a while. Progress as tolerated and as needed.
- If you're at work or have time constraints, skip the standing/swaying part and start the pulsing back and forth movements right away.

- If you sit all day, try to set a reminder on your computer or watch and do this stretch every 20 minutes.
- If you know you have to sit for a while to do a project, then do this exercise beforehand to minimize compression effects of sitting.

For more information go to www.StretchToWin.com.

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