

Back Work Through the Ten Series

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ABSTRACT Every session of the Rolfing Ten Series includes back work. Carol Agneessens offers ideas to raise our awareness of the opportunities of this work and to increase its effectiveness.

Back work is an essential opportunity for practitioners to educate clients and facilitate their body awareness. The possibilities for interventions are many. Here are three approaches that I work with.

- transitions: lying → sitting → standing → walking
- orientation: to the field around the client
- core awareness: continuity from the feet through cranium with energetic embodiment of the back, front, and side body.

Transitions

When asking clients to come to sitting from supine, I use these moments to observe their pre-movement. How do they organize their body to get up?

- Does the client initiate this movement with jaw, neck, or diaphragm contraction as in doing a sit-up?
- If s/he does initiate with contraction, bring that movement to the client's attention and suggest s/he "roll to the side, bring the knees toward the torso letting the legs drape over the table, and then pushing up with her/his arm." Repeat as needed.

Once sitting:

- Have the client put his/her feet on a memory-foam bath mat (inexpensive at Bed Bath & Beyond), making sure knees are over ankles.
- Educate to the three arches and diaphragms of the feet, asking the client to "press gently" into the carpet feeling the "big toe mound – little toe mound – and heel" and the lift that arises in the 'diaphragm' of the

feet. By session four, I place a 'soft' inflatable ball between the client's knees to activate the midline to pelvic floor connection as the client does this same exercise.

Be sure to check the balance of the client's torso through the sitz bones. Is s/he lifted (or dropped) on one side? Bring that preference to the client's attention. If lifted on the right (for example), meet the lifting with your hand (under the tuberosity) to 'take over' the lift. Meeting the pattern this way allows the client to gently let the tuberosity drop to match the opposite side, settling into the pelvic seat. The sensation of balance through the pelvis and weighting through the sitz bones is revisited during all back work in the Series. Link this awareness: "Sitting balanced through the pelvic bones can be linked to driving habits, playing the piano, working at a computer, or sitting at the table for dinner." Facilitate your client feeling weight through his/her bones.

- While sitting upright, ask the client to 'imprint' his/her feet into the mat, sensing the connection from feet through legs into the low back (L3-4-5), where your hands are contacting the tissue. Feel for that connection. Often clients will 'do' this move by 'thinking' their feet/legs, not by feeling into feet and legs. Feel for this discrepancy. Ask the client to bring awareness directly into the legs and feet, to 'be' inside the legs and feet as if s/he is stepping into the skin stocking of the legs and feet. *Be aware of the client's breathing as s/he explores these sensations. (Is s/he breathing?)*

- To assist spinal lengthening: I may ask the client to imagine a feather coming out of the top of her/his head as s/he slowly curls forward into flexion with arms hanging at sides – (if this movement is available to the person). If not, make modifications depending on needs. For example, have a large physioball in front of the client that s/he can place her/his hands on to roll over on with the support of the ball. Before s/he begins the curling movement, have the client sense his/her hands imprinting the texture of the ball.

While curling in flexion, direct the client to touch the front-facing wall with the 'feather'. Watch that the client curls into flexion by lengthening from the hip joints, and not by taking the lumbar spine posterior.

As the client uncurls, have him/her feel for the support and connection through legs and feet. Suggest stacking abdominal muscles to stack the spine – one vertebrae at a time – letting the cranium be the last to come to upright.

- Addressing shoulder/scapula function and tension: Begin addressing scapula issues while supine. Often, I place my hands beneath the client's scapula and encourage a felt sense of weight in the bone. Or have an under-inflated balloon placed beneath the scapula, and have the client gently push the air to the edges of the balloon. Bring the client's attention to the serratus anterior muscle and how activation/sensation of this muscle facilitates thoracic opening and the scapula dropping back.

In sitting, for shoulders that are held up – connect your thumbs (like a hammock) and place them beneath the clients shoulder joint and under the client's armpit. Lift and take over the holding up that the shoulders are doing. As practitioner, feel for the place where the shoulder weight begins to drop into your hands.

Educate the client to the sensation of the weight of the bone of the scapula as part of the shoulder complex. In our 'car-centered' world, this is a place to educate your client to 'holding the steering wheel' or bike handles etc. Using one-inch dowels, have your client hold them as s/he engages ring and pinky fingers in the contact. Here you can educate the client to the sensation of 'weight on the underside' of the arm. When

folks grab the steering wheel with their index and middle fingers and thumb, stress transmits directly into their necks.

I use the words "imprint and reach through your feet" when connecting the client's system through to neck and cranium. Remind the client to sense her/his feet imprinting the carpet as you gently lift her/his neck and cranium out of the upper back, suggesting s/he have open eyes with vision resting on the horizon. This encourages a sense of two directions (palintonicity), orientation, and continuity through the client's system.

- In preparing to stand, have the client engage the support of her/his legs and feet while pressing into the carpet to come to upright. Sometimes one foot a bit in front of the other (rocker) helps this movement. You can then take this feeling support and pressing into the ground into activities such as squatting, gardening, lifting, etc.
- As the client moves into walking, help with finding the connection from feet - legs through pelvis - psoas to the upper center of gravity (G') and their desire.

These are just a few ways to work in gravity with the client sitting or standing.

Follow the movement from standing into walking observing the 'roll' through the toe-hinge and feet, push-off, and the transmission of connectivity between the psoas and the upper center of gravity. Are the client's arms moving and connected to spinal movement at T4-T5? All of this takes time and repetition. As we bring attention to clients' movement we engage educational moments that will travel with them beyond their sessions.

Orientation

Where am I? The ability to locate ourselves within the environment around us is crucial to survival. If a client shows any signs of disorientation after a session – even when s/he says it feels fine to drive – you can help in a few different ways!

With the client sitting, sensing feet on the floor (knees over ankle joints), place your hands on the outside of her/his thighs, above the knees. Ask the client to press out against your hands . . . then place your hands on the inside of her/his thighs and have the client to press inward against your hands. Both of these will evoke a strong sense of midline through the client's system.

With the client standing, you can do traditional 'tracking' making sure that the client's eyes are open and looking out at the 'horizon'. Ask for a knee bend and sense of the sacrum dropping. I'll use the cues 'sit' and 'unsit'.

Or, gently contact the occipital base (client standing, eyes open), and have the client make small movements of flexion/extension, sidebending (ear to same shoulder), and rotation. These movements imitate the positioning of the semicircular canals within the inner ear.

Core Awareness

Whether your client is lying, sitting, standing, or walking, facilitate 'core' awareness fundamental to alignment and orientation in space.

- When lying, bring the client's attention to the continuity from mouth, throat, and neck through abdomen and genitals.
- When sitting, have the client sense feet imprinting the carpet and simultaneously sense through the top of the head. Sense the 'big' toes weighting into the carpet. Sitting can be the first way to begin working upright in gravity that is fundamental to advanced work in gravity.
- In standing and walking, observe if the client is moving through 'core' or walking around this three-dimensional space, and guide appropriately.

As you engage your client in deepening 'in-bodied awareness', use your own system as a guide. Sometimes, I'll have the client place his/her hands on my body to feel my interpretation and often exaggeration of his/her holding patterns and then the release of the pattern. When educating the client from sitting to standing, I 'do' the movement with him/her. While moving from sitting to standing, I guide the client's system in this new way feeling for increased sense of in-bodied awareness and presence. Use of gentle, sensation-based language and a guiding touch are essential 'tools' to cultivate for all interventions.

Carol A. Agneessens, MS has been a practitioner of Rolf Movement Integration since 1982. Cultivating feeling-sensing-grace in movement is one of the guiding orientations of her life.