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The Philosophical Touch

When Resilience Becomes Strain

By Andrew Rosenstock, Certified Rolfer®

ABSTRACT Many clients who seek Rolwing® Structural Integration appear highly capable and resilient, yet arrive with descriptions of pain, misalignment, or a persistent sense of bodily strain that does not correspond to an obvious cause. From a somatic perspective, this strain often reflects not failure but successful adaptation – the nervous system organizing itself around chronic demands such as time pressure, emotional self-regulation, and social roles that reward endurance over responsiveness. For this Philosophical Touch column, Rolfer™ Andrew Rosenstock draws parallels with critical theory of the Frankfurt School to argue that resilience itself can become a form of defense, normalized over time. Rolwing Structural Integration offers a means of restoring perceptual choice – not by overriding adaptation, but by creating conditions in which the body can differentiate between necessary effort and habitual holding.

One of the patterns I notice most often in my Rolwing® Structural Integration practice is not a lack of capacity, but the opposite. Many of the people I work with are capable, organized, and deeply competent. They manage complexity, carry responsibility, and function well in demanding lives.

And yet, they often arrive speaking about fragility – describing pain, discomfort, or a sense that something in their structure is off. They may talk about feeling misaligned, unstable, or as though their body is no longer supporting them in the way it once did. Over time, it becomes clear that what they are sensing is not so much a system falling apart, but the strain of a system that has been holding a great deal for a very long time.

Beneath this appearance of resilience, there is often something quieter and harder to name: a persistent sense of effort. Not acute pain. Not collapse. But a kind of ongoing holding that never quite resolves. A vigilance that never fully powers down. A body that can rest, but does not know how to arrive there.

Ease, when it appears, feels unfamiliar. Sometimes even threatening. Letting go feels riskier than staying tense. This raises an important question – one that sits directly at the intersection of structure, function, and lived experience.

What if resilience itself can become a form of strain?

Forces That Act Before Choice

In earlier The Philosophical Touch columns (Rosenstock 2024, 2025a, 2025b), I've explored how lived experience arises through the body – how perception, sensation, and meaning are not added onto the body, but emerge through it. The body is not a passive vessel receiving experience; it is an active participant in how the world shows up.

Lived experience does not arise in isolation.

Before a person reflects on their stress – and I intend this word in a broader sense than common usage – before they narrate it, before they even recognize it as



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stress, their nervous system has already organized in response to the forces acting upon it. In Rolf Movement® Integration, we are taught to look for anticipatory postural adjustments – patterns that appear before movement begins, before a task is undertaken, sometimes even before contact. These anticipations are not habits in the casual sense; they are learned responses to conditions the system expects to encounter.

These forces are often subtle. They rarely announce themselves. More often, they are woven into the fabric of ordinary life:

- Expectations of productivity.
- Persistent time pressure.
- Emotional self-regulation.
- Social roles that demand consistency over responsiveness.

- Environments that reward endurance more than sensitivity.
- The constant presence of gravity and how a body learns to organize itself in relation to it.

These are only a few examples among many. The list could be extended in countless directions, as each system organizes itself within its own constellation of demands, many of which are registered somatically long before they are understood conceptually. What matters here is less the specific force, and more the recognition that the body is always responding within a field of influences – many of which are never fully seen.

The body does not debate these conditions, nor does it analyze them.

It meets them, and it adapts.

From a somatic perspective, this is not pathology. It is an intelligence. The nervous system is doing precisely what it has evolved to do: organize itself in response to conditions in order to survive. But survival and integration are not the same thing.

Earlier, I emphasized that my usage of the word ‘stress’ is broader than the way we might typically mean it in casual conversation. What I’m pointing to here is not just how stress feels, but the conditions the system is organizing around. I’m not talking about feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or busy, though those experiences can certainly be part of it. I’m using the word more structurally to mean anything the system is organizing around. In this sense, stress is not only how something feels, but also the presence of a stressor itself



In this sense, stress is not only how something feels, but also the presence of a stressor itself – a demand, pressure, or condition that requires ongoing adaptation. Much of what the body holds does not arise from felt stress, but from what it has learned it must accommodate.

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A Critical Lens on Adaptation

It is here that the work associated with the Frankfurt School becomes relevant – not as political theory, but as a way of seeing. This twentieth-century school of thought developed what came to be known as critical theory – a way of questioning how experience is shaped by systems – including systems of inequality – often without being directly seen.

Thinkers associated with this tradition – such as Theodor Adorno (1903-1969),

Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) – held distinct perspectives, emphases, and values. Some were more concerned with culture, others with reason, technology, or liberation. For the purposes of this discussion, however, those differences are less important than what they shared: a concern with how large, often invisible, forces shape human experience, long before that experience becomes conscious or chosen. For Rolfers™, who regularly speak of working with gravity – a constant, largely unseen force – as well as other organizing forces that are not always directly perceived, this orientation should feel right at home.

What interested the Frankfurt School thinkers was not simply oppression or suffering,

but adaptation – especially adaptation so successful that it becomes invisible.

This was a central concern of the Frankfurt School: not why systems fail, but why they succeed so well that their consequences are no longer questioned. This theme of stress becoming unseen appears in different forms throughout this article. We keep returning to it because some of the most powerful forces shaping human experience are often the ones that have become the hardest to perceive.

What happens when people adapt so thoroughly to their conditions that the conditions themselves disappear from awareness?

From a somatic standpoint, this question lands very close to home. We see it in

how a body prepares for what has not yet happened. In how tension organizes before contact, before movement, before demand is fully present. The system is not simply responding to stress – it is anticipating it.

In the Rolfing paradigm, we often speak about adaptability as a core principle of the work. Seen through this lens, adaptability can be understood more broadly – not simply as the capacity to respond to changing conditions, but as the ways in which a system has already organized itself in anticipation of them, often long before those patterns are consciously recognized.

Function Without Vitality

One of the central concerns of critical theory was what happens when function becomes detached from aliveness. A system can work remarkably well while quietly diminishing the very capacities that make it human. In fact, it is often precisely this effectiveness that allows the underlying cost to go unnoticed.

In bodies, this often appears not as breakdown, but as organization:

- Postural strategies that prioritize control over responsiveness.
- Muscular tone that supports endurance but limits sensation.
- Nervous systems optimized for vigilance rather than recovery.
- Movement patterns that are efficient, repeatable, and narrow.

Please note that these are not failures; rather, they are highly successful adaptations.

And because they work, they are rarely questioned.

But when efficiency – effective within a particular context – becomes the dominant mode of organization, it can replace responsiveness more broadly, and something subtle begins to erode. Sensation narrows, emotional range contracts, and rest becomes less accessible. This is not because the body cannot rest, but because it no longer trusts rest.

What once supported the system begins, over time, to limit it.

The system remains functional, but it is no longer listening – no longer orienting to what is actually present.

What interested the Frankfurt School thinkers was not simply oppression or suffering, but adaptation – especially adaptation so successful that it becomes invisible.

What we often call resilience, in these cases, is sustained effort.

When Resilience Becomes a Defense

One of the recurring insights of Frankfurt School thinkers was that not all forms of freedom are actually liberating. A system can feel autonomous, capable, and self-directed while remaining tightly organized around conditions it did not choose.

From this perspective, resilience can sometimes function less as a sign of health and more as evidence of how thoroughly a system has learned to accommodate what is demanded of it.

For example, I often work with clients whose bodies appear organized and stable, yet carry a subtle, continuous holding. On the table, there may be a persistent tone through the shoulders, a guardedness in the breath, or a pelvis that does not fully settle. Even when there is no immediate demand, the system remains organized as though something is about to happen. What appears as stability is often the continuation of a pattern that has not yet had the opportunity to reorganize.

Resilience is widely celebrated, and for good reason. The capacity to endure difficulty, to reorganize under stress, to continue in the face of challenge, is essential.

But resilience is not a single phenomenon.

There is a resilience that supports flexibility – the ability to meet stress and return to ease. And there is a resilience that defends against collapse by never allowing the system to soften at all. The latter does not arise from stubbornness or denial. It develops when conditions repeatedly demand self-management, control, and vigilance – when letting go

feels unsafe, impractical, or irresponsible.

Over time, this form of resilience becomes identity:

“This is just how I am.”

“I’ve always been tense.”

“I don’t really feel stress.”

From a critical perspective, this is not freedom. It is normalization.

From a somatic perspective, the cost is not always obvious, but it is felt:

- Reduced interoceptive clarity.
- Diminished access to pleasure or stillness.
- Difficulty settling, even when circumstances allow.
- A background sense of effort that never quite lifts.

Often, what disappears first under chronic pressure is not function, but *feeling*.

Stress That No Longer Feels Like Stress

One of the most challenging aspects of chronic stress is that it stops announcing itself.

When a stressor becomes ongoing, it no longer feels like an event. It feels like ‘baseline’. The system adapts so thoroughly that tension, vigilance, and holding are no longer experienced as responses – they are experienced as normal.

From the outside, these bodies often appear stable. From the inside, there is frequently a sense of contraction without a clear cause.

This is not because the body has failed to adapt, but because the adaptation has persisted beyond the conditions that originally required it.



What once supported the system begins, over time, to limit it. The system remains functional, but it is no longer listening – no longer orienting to what is actually present. What we often call resilience, in these cases, is sustained effort.

Critical theorists were concerned with precisely this phenomenon: when adaptation becomes so complete that the conditions requiring it fade from awareness. Somatic work encounters the same pattern, but through tissue, tone, breath, and perception.

The body remembers what the mind no longer questions.¹

What Rolfing® Structural Integration Can Offer

Rolfing Structural Integration does not aim to remove stress from a person's life. Nor does it attempt to override adaptation. Instead, at its best, it offers something quieter and more fundamental: the restoration of perceptual choice.

Through touch, presence, and relational attunement, we help make forces perceptible again. We support differentiation between support and strain, between necessary effort and habitual holding.

This is not about convincing the body to let go. It is about creating conditions in which loosening grips becomes an option.

Often, the first shift is not dramatic – it is the simple recognition that effort is present where it had previously gone unnoticed.

Change does not occur because we impose it. It occurs because the system senses new possibilities and reorganizes itself accordingly.

In this way, structural work can become a site of gentle critique – not of the

person, but of the conditions their body has learned to survive – a concern that sits very much in line with the critical orientation of the Frankfurt School.

Resilience Reimagined

Perhaps resilience is not best measured by how much a body can endure. Perhaps it is better understood as the capacity to reorganize – to sense, respond, and soften without collapse.

From this perspective, resilience would not be something the body proves. It would become something the body rediscovers when conditions allow sensation, responsiveness, and integration to return.

It becomes less about holding together,



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and more about no longer needing to.

And the question we might quietly leave with – for our clients and ourselves – is not:

How strong am I?

But something simpler, and perhaps more unsettling:

What would my body do if it no longer had to hold everything together?

Endnote

1. Here, "body" is being used in the broader embodied and somatic sense, referring not only to physical structure but also to subcortical, autonomic, and neurophysiological processes that shape experience prior to conscious reflection. From a neuroscience perspective, many

of the patterns of bodily organization we encounter clinically are organized below the level of conscious cognition long before they are conceptually recognized.

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