

Movement And Posture

By Josef DellaGrotte



in Bodywork

Posture has many facets. Most importantly, it is dynamic, not static. Posture is not a position but a way of responding to the challenges of everyday life. It is part of our biological experience and heritage. It is the structure and the functional expression of the body's nervous system and all its other related systems engaged in a constant and continuous dialogue with gravity, moment by moment.

Every bodyworker is either consciously or unconsciously aligned with good movement and posture, or is on the way to experiencing problems, pain or strain over time. For every action that is going to be performed, the nervous system communicates either by habit or by intentional mapping to all sectors — muscles, fascia, joints, tendons and bones. The messages are like coded signals: How best to adjust to gravitational, biological, physiological, even chemical forces at work every time we get out of bed, sit, stand or walk. Posture, therefore, is a continuous adjustment that allows for a new equilibrium.

One somatic pioneer, Moshe Feldenkrais, viewed posture as a continuous functional activity involving direction and reversibility, while another, Ida Rolf, as the necessary structural balance to make good function possible.

To expand this further: Posture is both an innate and learned ability to do reversible movements of everyday life with resonant motion flow, support, stability, mobility, balance

and recovery, lengthening with strengthening, relaxation, interest and enjoyment.

Zoom in a little further and you find that posture can be seen as a chain of myofascial lengthening, a form maintained and strengthened by vectors of force, or directions of muscle contraction which the nervous system can track.

By nature and design we are meant to be structurally and functionally integrated, well and fit, and that means mostly free of postural pain syndromes. The potential is always there, but requires awareness and conscious learning about how we are actually moving, using or mis-using our bodies.

Addressing Posture in Bodywork

Whatever form of bodywork we do, through one means or another, we address posture. Any tissue release, any manipulation of a beneficial kind, leads to the body getting back into some type of alignment, balance or relaxation mode. But if you only temporarily relieve the client, the duration will be limited and the learning extremely minimal.

Good bodywork is inextricably linked to the practitioner's functional posture. The movement organization of the practitioner makes all the difference. The practitioner must move her body in harmony with the inexorable laws of gravity and biomechanics. All bodywork is movement based. The client, even if only passively aware, sooner or later

A Lesson-Exercise

These simple movements demonstrate the spiral path of rotation and elevation based on Feldenkrais principles of awareness through movement:

- Stand near a wall, in an asymmetrical stance, right foot back, with fingers lightly contacting the wall. (See photo on page 64.) Imagine this as a body.
- Thrust gently through the left leg, following the force, connecting it through the left hip. This is the first connecting link in the spiral path. The next link is pelvis to spine and ribs, rotating to the right (more like a twist in the spine), bringing the left side into an extension-rotation. The next link is through the shoulder/arm complex. If the scapula is not stabilized, the practitioner will unconsciously default to the bad habit of lifting the shoulder and working the shoulder muscles, creating further problems.
- If you connect in this path, you will feel an immediate transmission into your left hand as the force is transmitted and expressed as a forward motion. If you do not connect, this is a learning opportunity to do a corresponding floor lesson in awareness through movement. The hands will press toward an imagined floating body suspended above you. (See photo on page 67.)
- Repeat three times slowly, then sit or stand, rest and observe, allowing the nervous system to process and provide feedback. Listen to the feeling in your body.
- Continue, using the back leg. The path is the same on the other side.



When you connect with your body's spiral path, your movement will flow forward.

Photos courtesy of Josef DellaGrotte.

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picks up on whether the effects of the treatment are momentary, or change-inducing, even at the unconscious level. The movement transmission is the message.

Consider the following: First, looking at any bodywork treatment reveals either well-organized movements or compromised, imbalanced, stressful postures during the application of treatment. The neglected and significant question is: Is the practitioner getting better or worse?

Another example comes from massage practice: Tradition, experience and habit have shaped the general protocol and expectations of a massage session. In this picture, the passive client comes to

a session for the purpose of experiencing relief or relaxation, without any self-induced movement except to be able to lie down, remain motionless and then to get up and leave, feeling the positive effects, but minimally conscious of the process. The reality is that the practitioner did most of the moving and the client's body was being moved. The effort involved was distinctly disproportionate.

Second, looking at the practitioner, any observer would see a lot of active mobilization that resembled work or effort. Any kind of hands-on work must affect one's body. Physics dictates that any force generated must travel freely without resistance or torque. To do otherwise is to generate turbulence affecting one or more components: muscle, nerves, myofascia, joints or bones. Whatever the modality used, the body must experience some

effect and this must be registered in the nervous system.

Third, the practitioner is moving her own body, but how? Good movement requires smooth resonant strokes, energy transmitted along vectors of force, direction of force, myofascial planes and a whole dimension of sensory-motor stimulation through touch.

No matter what the technique or style used, the practitioner has to begin with self-organization in the field of gravity.

Finding the Pathways of Connection

All bodywork practitioners must use primary functional movements that consist of combinations of extension, flexion, rotation and lateral bending, allowing joints to perform different actions. These are expressed along specific pathways of force in the body, emerging as structurally and functionally integrated movements. A good functional movement is precise and effortless, not forced. If the articulation with its corresponding muscle contraction, muscle lengthening, connective tissue or fascial spread, and internal sensory feel are not resonant and trouble ensues.

If the movements go well and combine to form patterns of action, or primary functional actions, not only does the practitioner benefit, but so does the client. Where the practitioner is struggling in her body, so the client absorbs the manual forces, leading to a possible pain reaction many hours after the session.

When the practitioner moves well, it indicates that forces are being transmitted along pathways of contraction and pathways of lengthening — an interplay of vectors of force matching up with myofascial pathways of lengthening. The net effect is both postural uplift and the neutralization of torque and stress.

An observer would see smooth motions and a relaxed and satisfied client. Movement is a science, a skill, →

an art form. When it's well-executed, the practitioner has a better chance of working without the growing attrition rate of injuries associated with stressful bodywork practices.

The real science and art of any bodywork modality begins and ends with the practitioner's awareness of movement, which has higher grade value than simply learning several external techniques. Without this awareness, it is only a matter of time before the gravitational stresses of life lead to structural and functional disorders in the form of musculoskeletal or myofascial pain. Disorder — the dreaded entropy of the body — sets in. Will power and determination are no match for these forces. The practice life of the bodyworker is cut short. Damage and pain becomes recurrent. Unfortunately, this is the unnecessary result either of poor learning or weakened kinesthesia.

The Psychophysical (Somato-Emotional) Dimension: Empathic Touch

We have indicated that the client who is being moved appropriately unconsciously responds and registers positive somato-physical or psychophysical well-being. This response is further enhanced when the client begins to notice feeling better when sitting, standing, walking or in other activities. Whenever the client notices that following a session something has carried over, and that some function has improved, this has significance. Whenever the nervous system has an experience that is not imposed upon it, but is suggested through empathic touch that matches the client's needs, there is likely to be not only healing but more: improvement of function, and with this, a further move in the direction of health and wellness.

Results that make a noticeable, observable difference are socially valued. Why, then, despite the extraordinary proliferation of techniques,

What Practitioners Need to Know

To be structurally, functionally, even psychophysically well-integrated, everyone needs these essential movement nutrients:

- Lengthening is specific to muscle groups and particularly applies through the spine and along myofascial pathways. Every position we assume when working on the client requires lengthening. Otherwise, shortening or harmful compression starts to take place by default. When you work, you are either lengthening or you are shortening. There is no in-between.
- Stretching involves the local connective tissue pathways. This is what connective tissue does while muscles are lengthening. For example, yoga stretches, done well, involve lengthening of muscles with more highlighted attention to slow release of the fascia. The emphasis is on holding postures, slowing down. The highlight is on structural effects, and less on function, as in everyday life activities.
- Strengthening of muscle groups in a balanced way takes place whenever we move concentric, against gravity. We can also focus on strengthening through particular exercises. Doing massage work can strengthen. It can also weaken.
- Resonant movement, or fluid transmission of wavelike energy, represents everything working together, with forces being distributed without turbulence or damage internally. Resonance derives from physics: Resonant frequency of motion principle, represented in pendulums, coils and springs. All living bodies seek and enjoy resonant movement.
- Relaxation responses are feelings of satisfaction and enjoyment from movement activity. Relaxation is an internal physiological experience. The response has been described and documented by many. How does it occur in movement? Whenever movement is resonant (the points at which we move through our own center of gravity, the neutral place), we experience a millisecond of effortlessness, even enjoyment.

We may not get the full complement of any one of these nutrients at any one time, but like getting vitamins and minerals into our bodies, it can take place at different intervals.



If you can't grasp the forward movement while standing, try the posture as a floor exercise. Press your hands toward the hypothetical body floating above you.

methods and modalities, are we no closer to the resolution of musculoskeletal disorders from weakness to strain and pain? What is missing?

As an extension of the consumer culture, we now have treatments for nearly every disorder. Treatment often can keep a person going longer without ever resolving the source of the problem. Treatment also keeps the client in a state of dependence. The more the person remains dependent, the more insecurity and anxiety may grow as byproducts. There is something innate in us which calls for self-care and self-determining responses to life's stresses and requires comprehensive core strengthening — physical, mental and emotional. Any good performance training (arts, athletics or otherwise) requires the practitioner/performer to deal with the stress and challenge of the situation and to come out better, not worse.

Bodyreading and Assessment

Most forms of massage, as well as many other forms of treatment, begin and end with the client in a gravity-supported, relatively passive, if not motionless, state. In these passive postures, areas of the body can be better addressed and manipulated. However, once the client is up and around, the nervous system will work to try to keep the person's body in the mode to which she is accustomed; that is, in the context of the habits of adaptation already formed and dominant.

The reality is that most treatments have to be repeated. And unless a new learning takes place, the habits do not change.

Out of cognizance of this reality, a new generation of somatic practitioners has been in search of new pathways that might enhance both practitioner and client awareness, and improve posture by addressing the habits that

so compromise it, affecting health and well-being down the line. These modalities (Feldenkrais, Rolfing, Aston Patterning, Trager, Alexander and others) emphasize reading the entire body as an interconnected psychophysical system.

Facing the Future

I propose the new emerging paradigm in bodywork will address major postural issues such as core weakening owing to sedentary life habits and its concomitant core strengthening. This shift will take the bodyworker and somatic educator directly into terra incognita, the up to now hidden region of the pelvis/spine complex and its interconnections.

We are almost to the point where the proliferation of approaches need to come together to establish a recognized and respectable professional basis.

The field of bodywork has a *raison d'être* beyond its presently limited scope. That basis is to help people regain their lost posture. The approaches can be diverse, but the goal lies in the path taken. This means practitioners of any modality who can analyze and assess posture in terms of structure, function and the pathways to get there will be in an advanced position to rise to the next plateau — a new way of reconnecting to our often culturally dissociated mind/body complex. **M&B**

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