

Ask the Movement Faculty

The Client Who Doesn't Feel Anything

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Q Do you have any suggestions for working with clients who have little body awareness (for example, clients who cannot feel any change from a session, even though as a practitioner you can see changes have occurred)?

A Most of us have had some experience with a client who doesn't feel anything. As we work on the client, we feel the tissues shift and change, we feel length and lift and integration coming into the structure. Then, when the client stands up at the end of the session and we ask him what he feels, his answer is "Nothing" or "Normal." Seeing our look of puzzlement, he may add something like, "What should I feel?"

For a new Rolfing® practitioner, who is not yet confident of his skills, a client like this can reinforce his fear that he is not effective. For a practitioner who has a strong sense of professional identity involved with his capacity to produce changes in the client, this can feel like a challenge to his reputation. For many of us, a client like this represents a challenge that we may not know how to meet. Oftentimes, the practitioner tries to compensate for the client's seeming lack of feeling by using more pressure, trying harder, or inwardly scorning the client as insensitive and thick.

What is going on inside a client like this? Could it possibly be true that he really doesn't feel anything? Although there are pathologies in which the sensory information from the peripheral nerves doesn't make its way back to the brain, these cases are far rarer than the client who shrugs his shoulders and says that he doesn't notice what has happened in a Rolfing session.

So we must come to the conclusion that in most of the cases, there is not a neurological problem – instead what we are dealing with is the way that our client processes sensation in his body. We are dealing with someone



who doesn't listen to the information that his body gives him.

What are some reasons for this? We live in a culture where we are socialized from the time we are born to not listen to our bodies. Religious and sexual conditioning teach us that the body's sensations, desires and impulses are not to be trusted. Drug companies advertise magic pills that remove inconvenient symptoms without our having to address the underlying behavior that may be causing the symptoms. A headache coming from overwork can be shut off with aspirin, so that we can continue overworking. Heartburn can be resolved with antacid, so that we can commit the same excesses the following evening with impunity. The body's messages are

invalidated, and turned off. This is the culture that has conditioned our clients and us as well, although Rolfing practitioners may represent a small counter-culture with different values.

Another reason for not feeling our bodies is trauma. Part of the body's innate, physiological response to trauma is to shut down and dissociate. Thus, although there is no damage to the cutaneous nerves, a person who has had surgery may experience diminished sensitivity in the place where the surgeon's scalpel cut through the skin. Someone who suffered sexual abuse as a child may not feel his pelvis or legs. When the world sends us an overwhelming event, sometimes the only effective defense we have is to distance ourselves from our bodies and stop feeling.

In a similar vein, when we have been injured or are experiencing severe pain, one of our natural responses is to withdraw awareness from the part of the body that has given us so much discomfort. This is a reflex that may save us some pain in the acute phase, but in the long term it ends up getting us into deeper trouble.

Our bodies give us constant feedback that helps us to make adjustments that will enable us to find and maintain optimum functioning. When we stop listening, we lose out on the continuous cues that can help us to find a pain-free way of moving and living.

Take, for example, the case of a person who has neck and shoulder pain and sits in front of a computer for hours at a time. If he allowed himself to register what was happening in his body, he might feel that his eyes had become strained and tired, and that this, in turn, was creating shortness and tightness in his neck and shoulder muscles. Feeling this, he could opt to get up, stretch, go to the window and gaze out into the distance to rest his eyes, or many other little things that would help him to relax and release his tension before it reached a critical level. However, if this same person shuts down the uncomfortable messages from his body, he also loses the opportunity to adjust and correct.

So what do we do with the client who "doesn't feel anything?" The first thing that may need to happen is a reframing of our

idea of what we do in our work with the client. Dr. Rolf spoke of Rolfing practitioners as primarily educators. Unfortunately, the concept of education often gets lost in our zeal to straighten out the client, in a paradigm that is mostly mechanical. When we reorganize the client's structure, but do not address the way that he lives in his body, or – more especially – the way that he listens or doesn't listen to his body, we often get a client who feels better in the short run and who looks better in his pictures, but who will come back to us in the long run with the same problem.

If we take the hypothesis that pain is the body's way of signaling us that something needs changing, the client who "doesn't feel" has distanced himself from a very important piece of his self-correcting capacity. He needs our help to learn to listen to his body and adjust according to the messages that it gives him.

Over the years, I have developed a protocol that has helped me to work very successfully with the client who is not aware of what he feels. This protocol is presented below.

Protocol for Working with the Client Who "Doesn't Feel"

- Know what your client wants.
- Be aware of and work with counter-transference.
- Evoke curiosity.
- Validate sensing and feeling and relate it to the client's goal.
- Work with contrast.
- Relate learning to the client's life.

KNOW WHAT YOUR CLIENT WANTS

Knowing what it is that motivated your client to seek Rolfing® is the key, not only to working with clients who have difficulty knowing what they are feeling, but also the key to a successful practice.

Inside of each of us, Rolfing practitioners and clients, is a seed of discontent, a wanting to become more than we are. It may manifest as a desire to be pain-free (a strong motivation for many of our clients), to be more graceful, to run faster, to have better posture, to speak better in public – the desires that bring clients to our doorstep are as varied as the clients themselves. When we are able to hear and address the client's desire, it helps him to feel satisfied with our work, and will also help him to

step forward into a more responsible and proactive relationship with his own body.

Often, we Rolfing practitioners get so involved in our own vision of the client and what he needs that we forget to consult with him. When our client comes to us because of crippling back pain, and we talk to him about how we will align his body in the gravitational field, without helping him understand the bridge between back pain and alignment in the gravity field, we lose the client. He does not feel heard, and he is not motivated to cooperate with our work.

On the other hand, when we keep foremost in our mind what it is that this particular client wants, and help him to understand how we are addressing it each step of the way, the client will be motivated to work with us. We will achieve the highly desirable therapeutic alliance, where both Rolfing practitioner and client give the best of themselves for the successful treatment of the client.

BE AWARE OF AND WORK WITH COUNTER-TRANSFERENCE

We all want to be good Rolfing practitioners and help our clients. However, there is a slippery boundary that many of us cross without noticing it, and the client who "doesn't feel" provides an excellent opportunity to become aware of this. Ultimately, the client's well-being is his own responsibility. Ultimately, we, as Rolfing practitioners, cannot fix another person.

Rolfing is a far-reaching body of knowledge and a very effective tool that can help to understand where the client is caught and help him get unstuck. Our skill and knowledge are tools that we place at the disposal of our clients. However, if the client's self-regulating core is not able to recognize or use our tools, no change will occur. Clients, as living beings, are complex, self-organizing systems, not machines.

When we (and our clients) fall into thinking that we are going to fix them, we are heading for disaster. Especially when the client does not respond as the practitioner thinks he should. If the practitioner only feels good about himself when the client is happy and reporting marvelous changes, he will take it very personally when the client says that he doesn't feel any difference from the work that was done. From taking this personally, it is only one small step to finding oneself in one of two common traps

related to counter-transference. In one, the Rolfing practitioner privately scorns the client as insensitive and "resistant" and gives up on helping him make the bridge between not feeling and feeling. In the other, the practitioner may enter into a contest with the client where the more determined the practitioner becomes to "make" the client feel, the more determined the client becomes to not feel. Neither of these situations serves the well-being of the client or a positive outcome of the work. Both of these situations are easy to slide into if we are not paying attention and doing our own work on ourselves.

Paying attention to the counter-transference – or, in other words, those places where we get "hooked" by our clients – and taking the time to work with it and "unhook" can help practitioners find the neutrality that best allows us to deliver our potent tool for transformation to the client in a way that he can recognize and accept.

EVOKE CURIOSITY

When I work with a client who has difficulty in registering and recognizing the information that his body gives him, I generally notice this pattern in the first session. From this point on, I will begin to make many interventions that will eventually stimulate his curiosity about what he does and doesn't feel.

After working with one side, I will always ask him to compare it with the side that hasn't been worked on. If he doesn't notice a difference, I will ask him more specific questions, such as "Do you notice a difference in the way this side rests on the table?" "Does the breath move in this side of your body in a different way from the side we haven't worked on?" I will even say something like "Wow, I'm noticing quite a difference visually when I look at the two sides of your body. That hip looks so much more open to me. I'm curious if you have an internal sensation that matches that." These questions stimulate the client's curiosity and help him to begin to pay attention in a new way. Usually, when you prompt the client with more specific questions, he is able to notice some changes. After working with the second side, I always make a point of asking him if he feels the two sides more evenly now. Usually, if I am willing to take the time to help him notice, the answer will be yes.

If you do this (working one side, feeling the change, then working the other side and feeling how the difference evens out), you will have a way to stimulate the client's curiosity if, at the end of the session, his response to your question "What do you feel?" is "Oh, nothing, normal, I guess." He felt a change, he felt the two sides even out. What might be happening that now he doesn't notice a change? Is it that the change didn't happen? Could it be something else? Some other mechanism perhaps that results in his discounting the change?

The first time this happens the client may only be mildly curious and then forget about it. But as this begins to appear as a pattern across the sessions, his curiosity will increase. Then, he will become ripe to make a change, not only in his alignment, but in the way he relates to his body.

Remember that this process requires patience, consistency and perseverance. You are helping the client remember how to speak a language he knew long ago but has forgotten for many years. One intervention will not be enough, nor will two. However, if you touch into this patiently and repeatedly through the course of each session, by the end of a Ten Series you will have stimulated sufficient curiosity to make the client available for a deeper change.

VALIDATE SENSING AND FEELING AND RELATE IT TO THE CLIENT'S GOAL

Now we return to the goal – the client's original reason for coming to see you.

If we want to motivate the client to come home to a body he left behind long ago, there is no better way to do it than by tying his budding capacity to sense into his body to that which he desires to change.

Let's take an example that many of us see frequently – a client who wants to cure his low back pain. He doesn't have a lot of awareness of his hips, lower back and pelvic floor. All of it moves as an undifferentiated block. He withdrew his awareness a long time ago, because feeling was too uncomfortable.

As you work with him and help him to notice the new differentiation that is happening here, you may want to point out that some postures and positions are comfortable for his lower back and some are not. Now he is able to distinguish the

difference, and this means that he can adjust his posture accordingly. This gives him power over that which has made him powerless up until now. When he notices that the position in which he is sitting hurts his back, he can shift and find one that is more comfortable (make sure you help him find some options – so that he has a new possibility to move into). Now he can be proactive! This can give your client an enormous sense of freedom and power. It also motivates him to explore further and to tell all his friends how fantastic Rolwing® is.

WORK WITH CONTRAST

Once the client is starting to remember the language of feeling and is beginning to be curious about what he feels, a very useful tool to help empower him is the tool of contrast. Let's return to the client who came to Rolwing because of his low back pain. As we work with him, we discover that his habit of carrying his chest posterior to the support of his pelvis creates strain and pain in his lumbar vertebrae. One way to really bring this home and motivate him to begin to play with his newfound possibilities in the context of daily life is to have him become aware of what happens to his low back pain when he drops his chest back behind his pelvis. If he exaggerates the pattern with his chest, does the pain intensify? On the other hand, when he brings his chest forward and allows it to rest over the support of his pelvis, what does he feel in his low back? How does this new alignment affect the pain? When the client can feel the difference that the new posture makes to his central goal, then you help him to move between one posture and the other until he can do so at will. When he is able to do this easily in the Rolwing room and is fully aware of the effects that each posture has on his low back, almost certainly he will begin to notice and self-correct in his life.

RELATE LEARNING TO THE CLIENT'S LIFE

By this time, hopefully, your client is feeling both empowered and motivated, and is already taking steps to apply what he is learning in his Rolwing sessions to his day-to-day life. The practitioner's job, at this point, is to help him deepen his awareness of how to do this. If the client sits at a computer many hours per day, for instance, a little education about how to choose a chair that supports his low back

and how to position the computer screen for maximum ease while working can be enormously helpful.

It may be that practitioner and client also notice that his habit of falling posterior with his upper body intensifies in situations where he feels overwhelmed or unsure of how to behave. In this case, awareness is once again the key element. In a moment of insecurity, if the client is able to notice that he is pulling back, that his chest is moving behind his base of support and his back is beginning to hurt, he can choose to change his posture. As he moves into a more aligned posture, it may also be that he begins to feel more aligned with himself and less unsure. Thus symptom relief and a new, more comfortable posture in life and in relationship with others begin to flow together in a harmonious and empowering way that will help the client maintain his newfound well-being over a much longer period of time.

CONCLUSION

Each client is different and the forces that work in the human being are always unique. There is no set formula for working with the complex and mysterious creatures that we are. So the above, more than a protocol, is a series of questions and curiosities that may help us to follow the thread of awareness and intention deep into the labyrinth of the client's being so that he may emerge empowered and more alive in his own life.

If Rolwing is truly a science and art of addressing the whole human being, ultimately it is not enough to straighten out our client's structures, we must help them to come home to themselves in a new way. This means helping them to recover the capacity to be present in their bodies, to know what they feel and to use this ability to feel to make more and more alive choices.