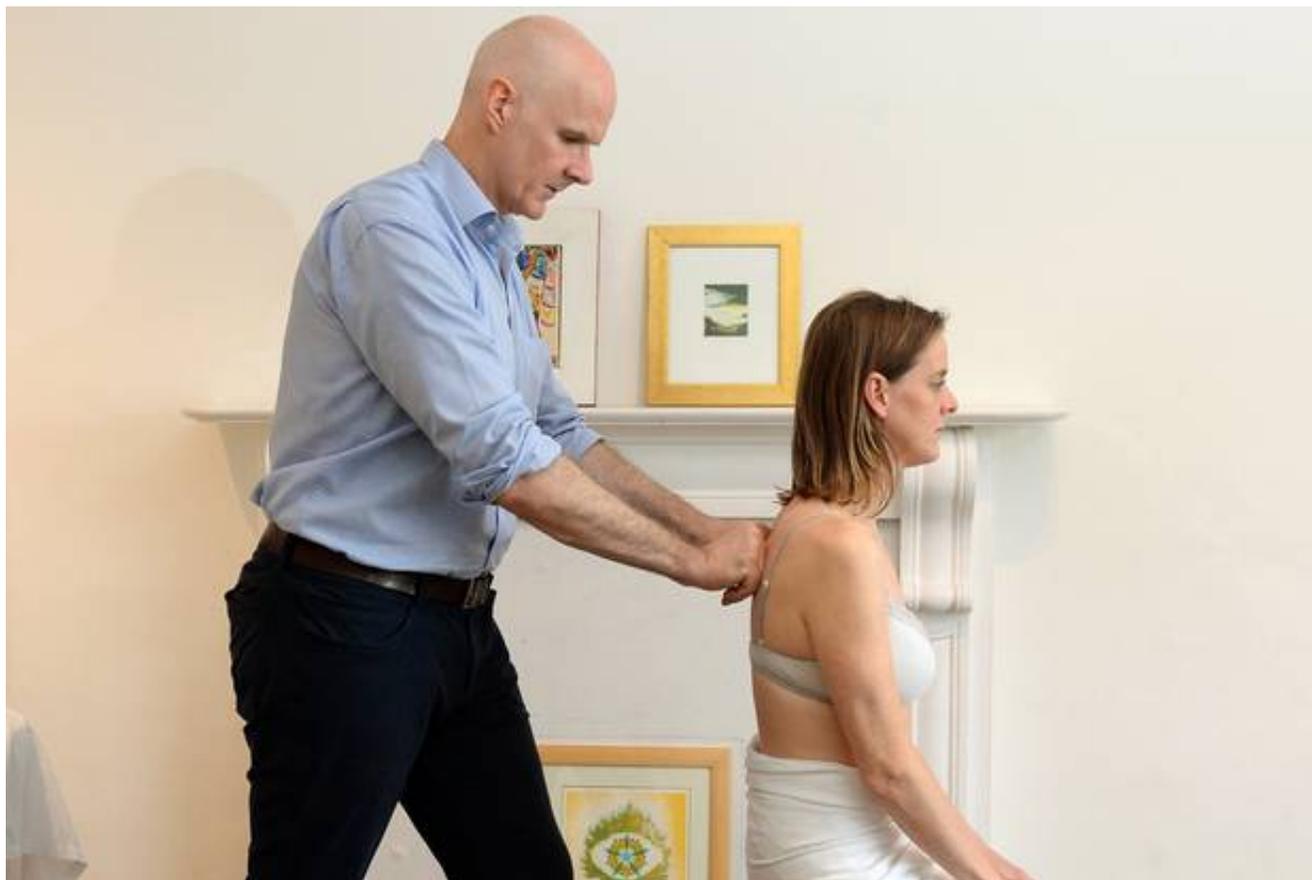


# Could rolfing give you a marathon edge?

A course of physiotherapy is de rigueur for many injury-prone runners, but the lesser-known practice of rolfing could be just what the running doctor ordered, writes Dee O'Keeffe



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Rolfer Joe O'Kelly demonstrates the practice on Mags Fitzgerald at his workplace in Rathmines, Dublin. Picture: Caroline Quinn

**Dee O'Keeffe**

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Around this time of year, there is a tribe of people for whom every twinge of discomfort in their body plants a seed of worry and doubt.

They're not self-obsessed hypochondriacs, they are marathon runners, hoping that just weeks out from race day

on the October bank holiday weekend, they won't see all of their training being written off through injury.

The 40th Dublin City Marathon takes place on Sunday, October 27 and given that most participants are doing between 40 and 100 miles per week, they're right to worry. By this stage of the game, only the weather or your body can ruin your carefully laid race-day plan.

The former is in the hands of the gods, but the latter can still be given a helpful performance boost ahead of the big day.

Physiotherapy is the established course of action for anyone dealing with the fallout of putting your body under this level of pressure. Rolfing is a less well trodden path to increased lung capacity, pain-free glutes and knees that can take on the gruelling 26.2 mile run, but one which has served this marathon runner rather well over the years. A rolfer won't just work on the injured part of the body, they adopt a holistic approach.

Dr Ida P Rolf, PhD was born in 1896 and obtained her doctorate in biochemistry from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University. Beset by spinal arthritis, a condition for which little medical help was available, she began her own lifelong exploration into human structure and function in order to manage her ailment. Her earliest inquiry was into hatha yoga, which she studied and practiced intensely for some years with Pierre Bernard in New York.

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In addition, osteopathy, traces of principles from the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, Korsybski's General Semantics, the body-centered psychotherapeutic approach of Wilhelm Reich, and homeopathy can be found in her work.

Rolf's technique is also referred to as Structural Integration (SI), a process which explores the domain of 'spatial medicine'. SI seeks to organise the body closely around the vertical line of gravity and lengthen it along that line, which is something that a body jaded from marathon training can benefit from ahead of race day.

My own wont is to book in for a few sessions on the legs and diaphragm pre-marathon and, if time and money allows, for a few follow-up sessions post-marathon so I can capitalise on the fitness gains made in time for cross-country season.

Rolfer Joe O'Kelly, based in the Rathmines Collective, underwent the rigorous training to become a rolfer, or Structural Integrationist. Having hurt his back quite badly in his 20s, O'Kelly had tried many different therapies to alleviate his pain before eventually going to see a rolfer.

This is a typical profile of how one ends up discovering rolfing – the standard client tends to be somewhere on a continuum between curious around personal development to desperate for some physical relief from ongoing pain.

"I played a lot of sport, particularly hurling. I played underaged hurling for Dublin but I hurt my back when I was 20 and I went to chiropractors, bone setters, physios. I went to see several surgeons – I even had a spinal manipulation done in 1994, but I was worse afterwards," says Joe.

Around 2003, Joe heard about rolfing and attended a visiting practitioner from Vienna, Kurt Kyck: “I went to him and it was the best thing I ever did for my back,” he recalls.

“I didn’t have any more serious back pain after my 10 rolfing sessions. I got rid of the insoles I was wearing for plantar fasciitis and I felt more confident. I felt taller, more at ease in my body.

“Every now and again, I had a bit of back pain but it was nothing like it was and my posture improved a lot and my body was better aligned. I guess I wasn’t leaning, standing or sitting the way I used to, so I wasn’t putting pressure on my lower back anymore and that helped a lot.”

This took place just before Joe did an MBA in Trinity and went to work as a stockbroker.

After losing his job in the financial crash, Joe bought a pizza shop. After five years of this, he was hungry for more meaningful work. When plans to open a yoga studio didn’t pan out, the idea of rolfing came back into his head. A two-week introduction to the training in Munich went well and Joe was invited to undertake the intense year-long programme. He has now been a working practitioner for almost five years.

This year, he also began studying to be a craniosacral therapist with the Upledger Institute in Ireland, broadening the scope of his work, and recently qualified as the first Irish graduate in Sharon Wheeler’s ScarWork. Sharon was trained directly by Ida Rolf. “ScarWork is a gentle and powerful way of working with scars and scar tissue,” explains Joe. “I work with surgical scars, caesareans, friction and heat burns, dog bites, cuts, laparoscopies, etc.”

## Tricky

His clientele reflects the fact that rolfing is a tricky therapy to market. “Rolfing can be different things to different people,” observes Joe. “Some people come here because they have back pain, shoulder pain... physical pain in their bodies and they’re looking for a solution. Other people will come just because they feel stuck in their bodies or in their lives, they’ve no particular pain, they just feel the need for change.

“At a very basic level, what we do is use a manual therapy – people lying on a table, we put our hands on them and work on the fascia of the body. This is the connective tissue that surrounds the muscle, muscle fibre, organs, bone, blood vessel and nerves.

“Our job is to give length and space to the body, and the body has its own innate intelligence and it will heal itself. We try to align the body better so that a person is not hunched over or standing crookedly or sitting poorly.”

As well as lying on the table, a rolfer will help you move better and offer some psychoeducation around what constitutes walking and moving better. “Really what we want to see is people standing, sitting and moving with greater ease, with less tension and stress in the body,” explains Joe. “We work typically over 10 sessions with people to try and achieve that. Hopefully, the people don’t come back because if they’re gone and they’re happy, then that’s our job done.”

Joe can still remember his first client, an opera singer in Munich. Emotionally she ‘fell apart’ after the third session. “She was in her 40s, she was a freelance opera singer who managed all her flights, bookings etc herself.

It was a lot of stress for her, plus she was seeing all the younger singers coming up behind her. But she gradually noticed an uplift and that she was feeling a little better after each session and at the end, told me she felt like an egg – as in whole again. Her voice coach had also noticed an improvement in her singing as the sessions progressed.”

Joe sees his work as that of a facilitator. The client comes with their issue and he can help or facilitate their body or psyche in achieving this goal. Over the course of the 10 sessions, your body gradually develops an awareness of where it can be in order to feel less pain and more ease.

Perfect posture is best achieved on a stool with no back – this is because our bodies are capable of supporting themselves – just observe any young child sitting on the floor with their legs out straight in front of them, backs perfectly straight. A rolfer works to rewind adult bodies back into something resembling that position – and it’s not just a physical job: the emotional and psychological baggage we carry is expressed in how we hold ourselves physically.

I know from my own rolfing experience over the years that changing spatial relationships within the body can help a person change the relationship they have with themselves and, ultimately, with other people for the better.

It’s not just a physical boost I get pre-marathon, it helps my race-day confidence too.

Rolfing is a therapy that can offer ephemeral and permanent change, an intoxicating mix indeed.

The KBC Dublin City Marathon takes place on Sunday, October 27 at 8.45am. Joe O’Kelly practices in The Rathmines Collective, 183 Rathmines Road Lower, D6, Tel: 086 8045218. Sessions are an hour and a half (€90 each). See [okellyrolfing.com/scar-therapy](http://okellyrolfing.com/scar-therapy); [joe@okellyrolfing.com](mailto:joe@okellyrolfing.com)

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