

## Hellerwork Overview by Colleen Hensy, Natural Choice

Hellerwork, a programme formulated by Joseph Heller in the USA in 1978, is a form of deep tissue bodywork designed to realign and rebalance the body, releasing chronic tension and stress and producing a more relaxed, youthful state. The central premise of Hellerwork is that a structurally misaligned body experiences gravity as stressful and so movement and flexibility are limited, causing energy loss, ageing and deterioration. A body in vertical alignment with gravity experiences gravity as a supporting force, is flexible and moves easily.

### THE ROOT OF INFLEXIBILITY

Hellerworkers believe that inflexibility stems from connective tissue known as fascia. Fascial tissue consists of plastic-like sheets that cover the muscles and muscle fibres and that come together at the ends of muscles to form tendons, which in turn attach muscles to bones.

In a well-balanced body, fascial tissue is loose and moist, but under continual stress and lack of movement, it becomes rigid and loses fluidity. Layers of fascia begin to glue together, causing the muscular "knots" familiar to so many people. The sheaths of fascia stick together in a systematic way based on habitual patterns of lack of movement.

Because of the way in which fascial tissue throughout the body is interconnected, stress in any one area of the body affects all other areas. For example, tension in the connective tissue of the leg pulls the torso out of alignment. Heller's treatment works systematically on all the fascial structures to improve the total energetic economy of the body.

### EVERY BODY TELLS A STORY

From the beginning of our lives, we begin to accumulate tensions, which affect the structural integrity of our bodies. We are walking testaments of every kind of input, be it physical, mental or emotional; every influence literally becomes "embodied".

Long-term movement patterns- such as the lopsidedness that comes from carrying a heavy briefcase in the same hand every day - embody particularly strongly and determine the form in which the fascia stick together and become rigid. These distortions cause further imbalance until the body is chronically tense and out of alignment with gravity.

### RELEASING RIGIDITY

Reconditioning the body after it has gone through the misaligning and ageing processes requires releasing the rigidity from the connective tissue and changing the physical, mental and emotional patterns that caused the tissue to become rigid in the first place. Here Hellerwork differs from Rolfing in its emphasis on movement education and verbal dialogue to bring about long-term release.

The full Hellerwork programme consists of eleven 60 minute sessions, each of which concentrates on a different part of the body (see Box - Body Balancing). All except the final session incorporate:

1. bodywork
2. movement education

### 3. verbal dialogue

Each session includes with deep connective tissue bodywork, where the practitioner uses his or her hands to "stretch" the fascial tissues back to their normal positions.

The movement education aspect of the session produces an awareness of the body movement patterns and facilitates discovery of more effortless ways of moving in an aligned way all the time

The verbal dialogue component focuses on allowing the client to become aware of the relationship between his or her attitudes and emotions and what sort of impact they have on the body. Emphasis is on clients taking responsibility for their attitudes so that these attitudes no longer affect the body adversely.

#### SELF-AWARENESS

At the end of a Hellerwork programme, there should be an effortless improvement in posture and clients will have learned to listen to their own bodies and be experts on their own bodies' needs and wants.

Self-responsibility is emphasised. The educational aspect of the programme gives the client the knowledge to ensure that their new-found state of balance continues and improves in the future. After the complete treatment, clients will be more fully aware of physical, mental and emotional inputs and how they can create change in their bodies. The process of ageing and deterioration now becomes more optional and a matter of personal choice.

#### FINDING FREEDOM

The release of old tensions and the new focus on economy of effort free the client to expend more energy in more constructive and creative ways. Hellerworkers initially show the client how he or she has unconsciously created a tension-ridden body and ease release from this. It is then up to the individual to incorporate the ideals into his or her lifestyle. In this, Hellerwork is a truly holistic programme.

It should always be remembered however, that Hellerwork is not designed to treat any specific ills. Rather, it is designed to establish and maintain the body in a state of optimal health - a state that can stop many health problems occurring in the first place. Prevention is the key.

#### BODY BALANCING

The 11 Hellerwork sessions are as follows:

Session 1: concentrates on the body parts - the ribcage, arms, shoulders and hips - associated with expanding the chest to breathe deeply and freely and aligns the ribcage over the pelvis.

Session 2: centres on the feet and legs; aligning the joints and making sure that the body's weight is distributed over the feet's arches.

Session 3: aligns the sides of the upper body by releasing tension in the shoulders, arms and sides.

Session 4: concentrates on the inside leg muscles and the pelvic floor.

Session 5: brings the pelvis into a more horizontal position that supports the "guts" more effectively.

Session 6: focuses on the spine and the whole of the back, balancing the work of the previous session.

Session 7: works to release tension in the head, face and neck and align the head over the torso.

Session 8: facilitates movement and balances muscles in the lower body - the legs, feet, hips and pelvis.

Session 9: facilitates movement and balances muscles in the upper part of the body - the arms, shoulders, ribcage and neck.

Session 10: works on the major joints to produce overall balance of the body.

Session 11: this is different from the other 10 sessions and no bodywork is used. In this session the treatment is completed by a process of acknowledgement and a review of results obtained, with the client asking any questions they might have. Learning how to take the results out into daily life is emphasised, together with continuous progress by more conscious use of the body

## HABITS COUNT

Various factors affect the body's alignment:

- Habitual physical stresses influence the fascia. A history of sitting hunched over a desk or continually carrying a briefcase pulls the shoulders out of line in relation to gravity. With repetition, the body sticks in that position all the time, even when it is not engaged in the activity that caused the misalignment. The fascia glue together and the whole body becomes out of balance.
- Habitual emotional stresses operate in the same way. A sunken chest is often characteristic of depression. If negative thought patterns - and the tense bodily stance that these produce over time - become a continual pattern, the body becomes glued in awkward, unbalanced postures.
- Habitual movement patterns, caused by physical trauma "embody" dramatically. For example, a person who has fractured a leg tends to walk in an unbalanced way to protect the injury. The irregular movement pattern can become the body's normal way of moving, long after the injury has healed.

As ageing continues, more and more of these physical and emotional patterns become embodied in the connective tissues and we lose flexibility. The body gets caught in a trap - the more misaligned with gravity we become, the more tension and stress we experience and the more energy we expend holding ourselves together. The body

shortens and stiffens and we age more rapidly. Hellerwork aims to reverse these processes.

### WISE WORDS

"The body stores the trauma of our lives in muscular rigidity, thereby keeping us stuck in the past. When we release the tension in the body and align ourselves with gravity, we take a new stand in life. This allows us to be at ease with ourselves and in harmony in our relationship to others and to our planet." Joseph Heller

### THE CORE OF HELLERWORK

Hellerwork sees the human body as being divided into:

1. The "sleeve": this consists of the body's superficial muscles and connective tissues.
2. The "core": the body's deeper muscles and connective tissues.

Sessions 1-3 of the programme are the "superficial" sessions, concentrating on the body's "sleeve". They deal with the issues of infancy and childhood: breathing, standing up and reaching out.

The core sessions - sessions 4-7 of the programme - probe beyond the sleeve. Core muscles tend to be under-used, tight and immobile: they are often called the "intrinsic" muscles as they control our underlying structure. Harmonising these muscles produces more graceful movement. Core issues are those associated with adolescence: control and surrender, gut feelings, holding back or expressing feelings and the balance between reason and passion.

Sessions 8-11 - the integrative sessions - bring together the superficial and core sessions and align the unique patterns of an individual client's body. Developmental issues associated with the session's centre on maturity, masculine and feminine styles and values, as well as integration and coming out into the world.