

Taking the Pain Out of Chronic Pain

By Eli Thompson, LMT, KMI

Most of my Structural Integration clients come to me because of chronic pain. It may be a mild discomfort in the shoulders or neck that comes and goes. It might be a constant tightness in the low back that must be babied for fear of spasms. Sometimes their pain is so severe that it is debilitating. As each previously attempted treatment failed to give lasting relief, their frustration turned to resignation. Pain management, not resolution, becomes their goal. As a professional, these are the cases that I find especially rewarding. Through Structural Integration, these clients often gain a new lease on life – rediscovering what they thought was lost.

We All Have Chronic Patterns

Chronic patterns of tension and tightness are not the problem. We all have them. They support us and help us in everything we do. These chronic patterns develop based on how we use our body. A helpful analogy for understanding their slow growth process is the shaping of a bonsai tree. The gardener will wrap a branch with metal wire and bend it in a desired direction. After several months, this metal splint can be removed and the branch will stay bent. The very structure of the branch, every fiber of the wood, has grown to support the branch in that state. The same happens within us. If we sit, stand, and act the same way, day in and day out, our body's structure grows to support that use. Ultimately, we shape our chronic patterns.

What Puts the Pain in Chronic Patterns?

When our chronic tension patterns develop in an open and aligned state, they help to support and strengthen us. If they develop in a compressed and misaligned state, they weaken and destabilize us. Misaligned joints wear out faster. Chronically tensed muscles become knotted and grow trigger points. Nerves may get impinged, causing numbness or shooting pain. Breath becomes shallower and circulation is hindered. Our overall health and vitality suffers. These dysfunctional patterns grow within us, year after year, because of poor posture, a lack of bodily awareness, and confusion about proper body mechanics. It may take a decade for these patterns to become painful, but by the time they do, they are part of our very structure.

This Thing Called Structure

In Structural Integration, structure is a broad term used to describe our fascial web and its balancing relationship to our skeleton. The fascial web is an intricately woven fibrous web, made mostly of collagen fibers, running throughout our entire body. In a sense, it is the leather in our bodies; designed to hold long term. The fascial web organizes our tissues, keeps things in place, and connects everything to everything else. Any strain that has resided within your body for more than a few months is now held in place by the fascial web. Your posture, your habituated movement patterns, and yes, your chronic pain are all maintained by your fascial web.

Structural Integration's (I trained with Tom Myers and am certified in Kinesis Myofascial Integration) effectiveness at resolving chronic pain comes from its ability to loosen and rebalance the entire structure. Our chronic pain is always related to and maintained by a systemic, structural pattern. For example, chronic neck pain is often caused by a misalignment of the spine. A misaligned spine implies problems in the pelvis. And problems in the pelvis suggest uneven support from the legs and feet. The

pain in the neck is a symptom of the way the fascial web is misaligning the skeleton. It cannot be resolved by addressing the neck alone. The solution must be in the context of the whole body. Otherwise the underlying misalignment that causes the neck pain will remain, eventually resulting in a return of the symptoms. In Structural Integration, no matter what tissue we are working on, it is always in the context of the whole pattern.

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Structural Integration is a series of bodywork sessions (10-16 depending on the style, KMI consists of 12) designed to free up, lengthen, and align the fascial web. In each session we focus on a specific part of the body. By studying the client's standing posture, I determine how that part of their fascial web is enabling the old, pain-inducing pattern. I then form a strategy for changing those tissues, using deep, slow manipulations, to provide support for a more functional, pain-free pattern. Each session builds on the next, enlisting more and more of your body to shift toward this new state.

The physical changes we make through Structural Integration give you the opportunity to use your body differently. However, if that potential remains unclaimed, your habituated way of doing things will persist. Therefore, as part of this process, you must search and explore your body between sessions. Learn to feel and recognize the old habits and patterns. This gives you a base line from which to recognize the new potential created at the table. Awareness is the beginning of change. As the series progresses, more freedom and alignment in your body become available for you to experiment with. You will discover new ways of using your body that are less taxing – ways that are based on the new pattern.

Keeping Pain Out of Our Chronic Patterns

Imagine that you have completed the Structural Integration series. It has been a powerful growth process and you have learned a great deal about your body and how to use it. Your chronic pain is resolved, and you have a new lease on life. What now? Will this last?

Yes, but not through more Structural Integration work. Once the series is completed, a six to 12 month break is required to absorb and integrate the work. Your homework is to simply maintain your improved awareness and pay attention to your posture and body mechanics. Fortunately, your standing, sitting, running, working, and playing are now based on an open, aligned structural pattern. All your future actions will guide the development of your chronic pattern toward health and vitality. By the year's end, the changes gained will be integrated into the very fibers of your structure. Without much effort, you will be able to maintain these pain-free results for years.

Eli Thompson is a licensed Massage Therapist, a certified KMI practitioner, and a certified teacher of the School of Anatomy Trains (www.AnatomyTrains.com). He offers Massage Therapy, KMI Structural Integration, and private Instructional Yoga classes in Brookline, MA. He also travels the country teaching the Anatomy Trains – myofascial meridians intensives to Bodyworkers, Yoga practitioners, and Personal Trainers. You can learn more at www.EliThompson.com, or by contacting Eli at 617-776-9494 or Eli@EliThompson.com.

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