

The Rossiter System

CLIENT-DRIVEN, PRACTITIONER-COACHED BODYWORK

by Sue MacDonald

The first clue that something is dramatically different about a session with a massage therapist trained by Richard Rossiter is the noise level—the vocal encouragement—or the “coaching,” if you will, of client by therapist. Onlookers might even describe it as yelling.

The words and tone aren't angry, mind you. As a former youth hockey coach, Rossiter knows energetic coaching—whether directed at athletes, corporate executives or political supporters—is an effective tool to get people more involved and more excited. And when he instructs therapists to get their clients involved in their own well-being and recovery, he starts with loud, verbal encouragement so that clients are explicitly aware of how much they're expected to stretch, reach and involve themselves (“Reach harder! Come on, get it ... strrrrr-etch. You can do it!”) to work pain out of their own bodies.

The second clue is the absence of a massage table, because nearly all Rossiter System work is done with a fully clothed client lying on a mat on the floor, while the therapist uses his foot to anchor the client's tissue in place and calls for movement—proactive, directed, specific movement.

The third clue is the reality that after 30 minutes of this new approach to massage, most clients are more than willing to get up off the floor, pay for a full hour's worth of work and go home, feeling looser, limber and certainly in less pain than when they came in.

Quick results

Not only is The Rossiter System a new way for clients to find quick, powerfully effective pain relief, says Rossiter, it's a way for massage therapists to reshape their practices to deliver quick results and simultaneously preserve the

UPPER CALF CRUNCH SE

SE stands for Smooth and Easy, and it refers to how the coach positions the foot to add weight to the client's calf.

Starting Positions

The client is the Person in Charge (PIC). The PIC stands next to a padded chair with no arms or a chair to which a foam pad, thick towel or blanket has been added to the seat. The PIC places the knee to be stretched onto the seat, with the knee toward the back of the chair and the foot hanging just over the front edge of the seat. The PIC can use the back of the chair for support and should stand up straight. No slouching!

The coach stands next to and facing the PIC.

Weight The coach uses the arch of the foot to add weight to the top part of the PIC's calf, using the same-side foot. If stretching the PIC's right knee, add weight with the right foot. If stretching the left knee, add weight with the left foot. Smooth and Easy means that the contour of the coach's foot matches the contour of the PIC's calf muscle when weight is added.

The Technique Once the coach has added enough weight, the PIC moves the foot at the ankle by pushing out with the heel while pulling inward with the toes, then pushing out with the toes and pulling the heel inward. The PIC does this back-forth, pushing-pulling motion slowly several times. Then the coach removes the weight.

Special Instructions If the chair is at an angle that causes the PIC to slouch or lean, place a book or other support under the other foot to correct the PIC's posture.

The coach can add more weight by simply leaning on the knee of the foot that's delivering weight. Don't press down—just lean and let the body deliver weight. The coach may also feel tight spots and knots in the PIC's calf and can adjust weight by angling the foot slightly.

For an even better stretch, ask the PIC to rotate the foot in a circular motion very slowly while pulling/pushing the feet and heels inward and outward. Rotate several times one way, then several times the other way. Go the hard way!

Repetitions Do Upper Calf Crunch SE three times. Be consistent. Do both legs.



Photos courtesy of Richard Rossiter

integrity and health of their own bodies through the equivalent of massage-therapy ergonomics.

“All bodyworkers like to think of themselves as body experts, so to speak, but the reality is that your clients know their bodies far better and far more intimately than we do, and I include myself in that statement,” says Rossiter. “The minute you give your clients a role in their own recovery, the minute you give them the responsibility for reclaiming their own bodies, the minute you free them up to go inside their bodies and hunt for their own pain in order to stretch it away, incredible things start to happen.”

Over the last 20 years Rossiter has innovated, updated, changed and evolved his own knowledge of connective

The Rossiter System is a teachable collection of more than 170 two-person stretching techniques.

tissue and the critical role it plays in both creating and preventing structural pain in the body.

It's a career that spans service as a U.S. Army helicopter pilot in Vietnam, commercial piloting in Alaska, installing repetitive-stress prevention programs in poultry plants in Arkansas, learning from and fixing a neurosurgeon's chronic back problems and the ongoing realization that bodyworkers often spend more time nurturing and healing their clients than they do making sure their own bodies are up to the strenuous challenge of moving, kneading and stretching other people's muscles and tissue.

In fact, Rossiter found in an unscientific survey of 107 licensed therapists that 88 percent of them, on average,

said their own bodies had begun to feel “worn out” from providing massage therapy, even those who had practiced two years or less. While nearly all the therapists said their hands and arms were most susceptible, the longer their tenures as massage therapists, the more likely they were to report pain in the low back, hips, shoulders and neck. Nearly one-third (32 percent) said “physical drain and strain and on my body” was the factor they liked least about massage therapy, more common, in fact, than the uncertainty of self-employment (27 percent).

Technique foundations

Rossiter suffered dislocated shoulders when his helicopter was shot down in Vietnam in 1971, and that continued to bother him for the nine years he worked as a post-military commercial helicopter pilot in Alaska. Unwilling to pursue drugs or surgery to relieve the pain, he finally found pain relief in Rolwing. He became a Rolfer

in 1983 and an advanced Rolfer in 1987, through training at The Rolf Institute in Boulder, Colorado.

But what this training didn't prepare him for was a clientele that wanted pain relief quickly, not in Rolwing's standard 10 pre-dictated, one-hour sessions. Many were factory workers in poultry plants in small towns in the South, and one was a neurosurgeon who sought Rossiter's help to alleviate his chronic back pain. Impressed by the results, the doctor then began referring his most difficult pre- and post-surgery clients—many of them with work-related structural disorders, carpal tunnel syndrome, trigger finger, elbow tendonitis or frozen shoulder—to Rossiter.

“The bottom line is that I was forced to re-think the way I practiced bodywork and come up with a more efficient, quicker and longer-lasting approach to pain relief—an approach that fit the needs of my clients more than it fit my training—and an approach that fit the

CROSSOVER



Starting Positions

The PIC lies on the floor in Hole in the Shoulder position, with both arms at the side and palms facing down. The PIC must relax the shoulder area completely.

The coach stands with the base foot about 12 to 16 inches above and behind the PIC's head on the side of the shoulder to be stretched. The base foot points toward the PIC's head.

Weight Keeping the knee locked, the coach uses the heel of the working foot and adds weight

into the “hole” in the PIC's shoulder, being careful to stay off bone or breast tissue. It should feel like a natural indentation. Each time the PIC relaxes, the coach's heel should slip more naturally into the hole. The coach should encourage the PIC several times to relax the shoulder completely.

The Lock The PIC locks pulling the toes in toward the head, pushing out with the heels, rolling the head away to the opposite side with the nose as far as possible down to the shoulder, and sweeping the

opposite arm out to a 90-degree angle with the fingers pointing straight to the ceiling.

The Technique Once the coach has added weight, the PIC points the fingers (of the arm being stretched) toward the ceiling, lifting the arm and raising it straight up to the coach. When it reaches the coach's hand, the coach grabs the PIC's fingers and gently shakes them, telling the PIC to relax the shoulder/hole area once again.

Once the PIC's shoulder is relaxed, the coach releases the PIC's

fingers, and the PIC reaches across his/her body at midsection toward the opposite hip, touching the fingers to the opposite hip. Once that position is reached, the PIC peels back with the fingers and raises the arm back up to the coach, with the coach again grasping the PIC's fingers with the hand and encouraging the PIC to relax the hole/shoulder area once again.

From that position, the PIC then peels back with the fingers (as in bicep) back toward the floor, keeping the elbow locked and landing the arm at a 135-degree angle from the body

(11 o'clock on a clock face). When the PIC's arm reaches the floor, the PIC takes a deep breath, pushing the coach's heel out of the “hole.” The coach removes the heel and returns the arm to the side.

Special Instructions

Crossover is based on Hole in the Shoulder, an excellent stretch for relieving pain in the shoulder blades and back of the neck. During Crossover, the PIC raises the arm to the coach's hand and executes a series of moves.

As with Hole in the Shoulder,

the critical part of Locking is for the PIC to roll the head over and down toward the shoulder as far as possible. That position further stretches the connective tissue in, behind and around the neck and shoulders.

At three times during this stretch, the PIC must consciously work hard to relax the shoulder before weight is applied during the crossover, when the hand is peeled back.

Repetitions

Do Crossover two times.

needs of the factories that eventually hired me to keep their workers productive and pain-free,” says Rossiter. “In those settings, time is money, and I had to find a way to deliver pain relief as quickly and effectively as possible so that people could return to work in as little as 20 or 30 minutes.”

The result is The Rossiter System, a teachable collection of more than 170 two-person stretching techniques, tailored initially in the 1990s for factory workers and now designed for bodyworkers, massage therapists, athletes, computer workers—anyone eager to take responsibility, with a stretching partner, to get out of pain. Rossiter has written three books on his approach to pain relief, including his latest, *Step Out of Pain the Rossiter Way: Powerful Two-Person Stretching Techniques for Head-to-Toe Pain Relief* (Bookmasters International, 2006).

The system includes techniques for the fingers, hands, wrists, arms, elbows, shoulders, neck, low back, hips, thighs, knees, feet and toes. The upper-body techniques are arranged in 10 levels of about six techniques each. The higher the level, the more challenging the techniques and the quicker the results. Each technique

Getting out of pain is a team approach.

is done two to three times, about 10 seconds each, and each has a name, a set of written instructions and an accompanying video (such as Elbow Torque for elbow pain, Hole in the Shoulder for shoulder pain, Ham Jam for hamstring/knee pain and Palm Hula for hand pain).

For Rossiter, getting out of pain is a team approach. The therapist (who he calls a coach) has the knowledge of the body/anatomy/tissue and can help coach the client, literally, out of pain by knowing how, when and in what order to use the techniques. The client is the “Person in Charge,” or PIC, the partner who knows exactly where pain exists and moves in his/her body. With the coach’s instruction, encouragement, badgering and guidance, the PIC can find the pain, stiffness and tightness, follow it through the tissue and stretch it out so that it resolves quickly. The PIC takes responsibility for healing and recovery, and the therapist isn’t

put on a pedestal as an expert. The PIC becomes an active participant in his or her own health and recovery, and the PIC—not the therapist—gets credit for successful results.

Weight + movement + locking

A Rossiter System “workout” (not a “session”) is different than a traditional massage session. There’s no need for the client to undress. All Rossiter workouts are done with the PIC fully clothed on a mat on the floor (a few techniques are done in a chair). The coach stands next to the PIC and uses his/her foot to add weight to the PIC’s body and then instructs the PIC on each technique: when to move, how to move and where to move, constantly adding verbal encouragement and instruction to the process.

The techniques are based on three concepts: weight, movement and “locking.” The coach uses her foot to anchor the PIC’s connective tissue in place before and during each technique. The foot adds warmth to the tissue, allowing it to stretch more easily and freely; moreover, the foot is less vulnerable to repetitive use than the coach’s more vulnerable hands and arms. Before each technique is done, the PIC moves into a position called locking.

Locking involves reaching out to the side of the body with the opposite-side arms, pulling the toes toward the head while pushing out with the heels and slowly rolling the head away from where the technique is being performed. This three-movement lock engages and gently “cocks” a head-to-toe sheath of fascia/connective tissue, the true essence of integration of connective tissue. Only after locking does the technique begin on the other side of the PIC’s body. Each technique then requires determined, active movement and conscious participation by the PIC, who is expected to identify, move into and stretch through the pain, stiffness and tightness in the specific area being addressed.

Combined power

Anyone trained in massage therapy and myofascial release would look at a Rossiter System workout and see elements of several modalities: stretching, shiatsu, Rolfing, deep-tissue work, myofascial release and more. But what’s really going on is a powerful combination of those things and something else: client-driven, practitioner-coached bodywork that deeply and powerfully changes a large volume of connective tissue in a very

short amount of time. It is client-centered work that revolves around the client’s input and feedback, and it requires coaches who are able to foster smarter, better clients through training and instruction. As Rossiter often says, “Train your clients, or they’ll train you!”

Rossiter is the first to admit The Rossiter System approach isn’t for everyone. Certainly, clients who want only relaxation massages or clients who rarely take responsibility for their health in any capacity are not good candidates. Neither are whiners or people with certain underlying health conditions, such as cancer, a history of back surgery for the back-pain techniques, rheumatoid arthritis, Guillain-Barre syndrome, acute inflammation or any condition still being treated by a physician.

Those who are likely Rossiter candidates include people who are motivated in personal health and fitness and like participating in health-care decisions, older clients who want their younger-feeling bodies back, committed athletes, people who are otherwise shy about getting undressed for a traditional massage and even stocky or obese patients who are difficult to work on because their tissue is thick and dense.

Using the foot, adding movement to each technique and truly involving the client in each stretch allows for deeper penetration of the tissue and the ability to change large amounts of tissue in short periods, Rossiter says.

“Why should you be the hardest-working person in the room when your client should be just as motivated as you are to get out of pain and/or to recoup a once-healthy body?” he asks. “When two people work together for the same results, guess what? You double the amount of work you can achieve in half the time, and the results are deeper, quicker and longer-lasting. It’s common sense that two people, working together, can accomplish a lot more, and that’s what The Rossiter System enables—two-person power.”

Jean Loose, a massage therapist and registered nurse in Cedar Edge, Colorado, has been using The Rossiter System techniques in her practice for nearly five years, and she agrees that integrating The Rossiter System requires not only motivated, involved clients, but new thinking on the part of therapists themselves.

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“Sure, it’s different to have someone on the floor and to have them fully dressed,” she says. “But that appeals to a certain group of clients as well. Some people will never get a traditional massage. For people who are tactile-defensive, this is much more appealing to them. It’s different for me, too, but people get so excited when they get immediate results. In my experience, as little as five minutes of Rossiter System work is the equivalent of 30 to 60 minutes of structural integration work or massage.

“What I tell people is that we get into our messes by the way we move, and the way to get out of our messes is to move our way out,” she adds, “and that’s what The Rossiter System does. It moves a large amount of tissue in a short time, and it’s fun to see the excitement among people who experience results immediately.”

Training

Rossiter has tailored his program for all types of learners, including live workshops, a book, home-study DVD courses, Web site access to streaming videos of the techniques and even iPod movies of the techniques.

“The power to get well must not be limited to a room or a clinic, especially in these days of incredibly accessible technologies and devices,” Rossiter says. “When you tap into the power of two people stretching together, you can make pain-relieving bodywork available to anybody at any time.”

Sue MacDonald is a former newspaper journalist who specializes in health and lifestyle writing. With her husband, Richard Rossiter, she has co-authored three books on The Rossiter System and its approach to structural pain relief. She also works as a senior research analyst for Nielsen Online, an Internet research firm in Cincinnati, Ohio. For more information on The Rossiter System, visit www.rossiter.com.
