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Myofascial Release

Understanding Chronic Pain and Self-Help Techniques

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Many ordinary people suffer from a wide range of chronic pain conditions. They are not necessarily athletes or super fit and their pains have not developed as a result of deliberately pushing their body to its limit. For most of them, their pain developed as a result of restrictions in their fascia caused by their everyday lives.

Fascia is the main connective tissue in the body, connecting everything to everything else, creating a body-wide web. The ligaments that hold our joints together and the tendons that connect the muscles to the bones are all made of fascia — but it does not stop there. As we examine the body more closely, we find that fascia wraps around and runs through every one of its structures, protecting them and giving them shape.

Fascia encases and runs through organs such as our heart, blood vessels, nerves and the muscles that make our limbs work. Going deeper, fascia holds together every cell and every fiber that makes up those organs, connecting each of them to its neighbors and through a vast network — connecting everything with everything else. Your knee bone is indeed connected to your thighbone, but not in the way you think.

In its healthy state, fascia moves fluidly and seamlessly to distribute tension and maintain balance in the

body. However, like every other part of us, fascia can be damaged causing the fascial web to snag, become misshapen and lose its flexibility and ability to move. This causes fascial restrictions that lead to limited movement, pressure and pain.

Some of the most common causes of fascial restrictions are:

Accident

All of us will experience a variety of accidents and injuries during our lives, from childhood to old age. A major trauma will usually be remembered long after the event and can have long-lasting effects. Even everyday minor incidents, such as bumping into a kitchen cupboard, missing your footing as you step off a curb or stubbing your toe, can also create fascial injuries that are communicated deeper into the body.

These effects may be apparent immediately after an accident, but they can also emerge years later, having been carried in the fascia long after superficial healing takes place.

Surgery and Scar Tissue

Scars may form as a result of accidents and injuries or, for many of us, they are the result of surgical procedures.



Surface scarring, particularly minor scarring, may heal and disappear as the surrounding area returns to normal. In other cases, the scars remain, looking and feeling different from the surrounding tissues.

Bigger scars are multi-layered — what you see and feel on the surface of your skin is the tip of the fascial iceberg. Unseen, under the surface of the skin, it is very common for these scars to expand, growing along lines of fascial tension and creating adhesions that can cause obstructions and problems of their own and lead to chronic pain.

develop as a result of holding unnatural postures for prolonged periods — for example, sitting at a desk. As our fascia tightens to maintain this position, exerting new forces within our body, the fascia becomes less fluid and more rigid, effectively forming a type of scar tissue.

Stress

Stress is a natural phenomenon and a physiological response to both real and perceived danger. Some stress can be good. Running to avoid a speeding car as you cross the road can save your life. The stress of

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Overuse and Underuse

As fluid beings, we are designed to move and to use our bodies. However, as our world has become more advanced, systems, machines and gadgets have been invented that have changed our lifestyles and how we move.

Overuse and underuse are related and growing problems arising from our modern lifestyles, including work and leisure. Both can cause fascial injuries.

The underuse of being stuck in one position working at a computer or on a production line, hour after hour, day after day, for months and years creates more and more layers of fascia, which stick together forming fascial restrictions that cause pain. The overuse of the exercises we do to counteract our jobs often creates microtears in the tissues, like tiny scars, that can build up and harden and develop into adhesions.

Posture

When functioning properly, the body is held upright by ligaments and fascia rather than by muscles. It can maintain an upright position without conscious postural control or muscle fatigue. Poor posture can

a virus entering your system will trigger your immune system to kick in and resolve the temporary illness, which is a good thing.

But after just seven days of sustained increased stress, such as from prolonged pain, the mind-body goes into a state of exhaustion in which normal protective immune responses are no longer triggered and the body is vulnerable to disease and injury. Over time this changes the mind-body from a balanced self-regulating system into an unstable environment where eventually even the slightest additional stress can spread the pain to other areas or magnify it.

So what can we do to counteract the problems caused by fascial restrictions and the resulting chronic pain?

One approach is myofascial release, which is a gentle hands-on bodywork technique that works to restore normal movement to the body by releasing restrictions caused by stuck fascia that has become dehydrated and hardened. This process relieves abnormal pressure on muscles, bones, nerves and organs, resolving chronic pain.

With a better understanding of fascia, it is also possible



for anyone to help themselves out of chronic pain using simple yet effective myofascial self-help techniques.

In the world of sports training, you do not have to look far to find self-myofascial release being promoted as the new 'quick fix.' Athletes in search of ever-greater performance are urged to 'attack,' 'smash' and 'blast' their fascia into submission using anything from foam rollers, to cricket balls to hard plastic sticks.

Apart from the risk of injury, this sort of talk is likely to discourage the majority of sensible everyday folk for whom self-myofascial release promises enormous benefits in terms of fitness, flexibility and freedom from chronic pain.

Fundamentally, everyone's fascia behaves in the same way, and treating it roughly and then expecting it to perform is misguided. My experience as a fascia specialist, treating people with a wide range of pain conditions, has shown that a slower, gentler approach is far more effective.

As the cells in our bodies are built to replace and renew themselves, with around six months of regular bodywork you can change your fascia. In this time, you can remove restrictions, restore flexibility and return fluidity to your tissues. Just as your body has gradually become stuck, so it can become unstuck.

I call this the 'slow fix.' The satisfaction of the slow fix comes from knowing that regular myofascial self-care brings results.

Here are my top tips for adopting the myofascial self-care slow fix approach:

1. **Lighten to untighten** – Fascia has a tensile strength of 2 tonnes per square inch (which is the equivalent of a panda sitting on you). You cannot force your fascia to release restrictions. Lighter, sustained stretches or pressure are best.
2. **Be patient** – When working with fascia, whether stretching or doing other body exercises, find

the point at which you can just feel the start of resistance and wait there at that barrier until the fascia starts to soften, give and release. This means holding a stretch or maintaining pressure in a ball exercise for two to five minutes. Research by Paul Standley of the University of Arizona¹ indicates that fascia responds particularly well to five minutes of sustained pressure. This may be too long for many people to manage at first, so start with at least two minutes and build up your time.

3. **Be attentive** – Pay attention to how your body (and mind) are feeling as you do your exercises. You may feel pain or other sensations elsewhere in your body, which gives you an indication of where to work next. You may experience thoughts and emotions as you work — notice them and gently allow them to let go too.
4. **Be gentle** – Many foam rollers and other implements are too hard or dense and unyielding. It is better to use something softer, which more closely replicates the gentle pressure a therapist would use in hands-on myofascial release therapy. Inflatable balls of around 10cm in diameter are ideal as they provide the correct pressure and can be used safely even when you have pain. Smaller myofascial trigger point balls can help get into knottier areas, but these must also have a degree of give. Rubber balls are ideal — do not be tempted by golf balls.
5. **Be mindful of mind and body** – In the context of myofascial self-care, being mindful means appreciating the interconnectedness of mind and body. Using relaxation downloads, meditations and breathing exercises can help relax the mind and encourage the physical body to let go. Taking a mind and body approach to myofascial self-care maximises fascial relaxation, release and rebalancing.

There are many different myofascial self-care exercises and stretches you can choose from. Here are



a few of my favourites to help release and rebalance your mind-body.

Spine Roll Down – standing or seated



- Starting at the top of your spine, tip your head forwards and imagine your vertebrae slowly rolling forwards and down, one at a time, letting your arms hang loosely by your sides.
- Continue to roll down for as far as is comfortable for you — your hands may end up somewhere near your knees

or touching the floor. Wait there for a few slow deep breaths and then start to roll back up.

- Imagine each vertebra stacking up on top of the one below it, starting from the bottom and working up your back with your head being the last thing to come up and rest on top of the stack.

Myofascial Ball Exercise for Back of Neck



- Using two inflatable myofascial release balls in a bag, lie on the floor or on your bed and place the balls under your neck, just below the base of your skull. Position the balls either side of your spine, to cradle and support your neck and head. Breathe deeply and let the weight of your head sink into the balls. Be here for 2-5 minutes to allow time for the fascia to release and relax.
- Working in this area can also stimulate the vagus

nerve, encouraging further relaxation of your whole mind-body.



The Towel Stretch

- This is a simple way to counteract poor posture from computer use.
- Use a large towel like a bath sheet and roll it lengthways into a big sausage. Place the towel on the floor and lie on it, face up, so that your spine is resting along the length of the towel.
- Make sure that both your head and your bottom are on the towel.
- Lie here for about 10-15 minutes and just let your mind and body relax. As you do so you will feel your body start to let go and gently stretch as gravity pulls your shoulders and pelvis down toward the floor.

Whatever exercises you choose to include in your routines, remember the principle of the slow fix as you work with your fascia. Committing to a regular practice of just 20 minutes of daily myofascial self-care can make a big difference over time. For many people it can be life changing as they move out of old chronic pain and towards a new pain-free future. €



Author Amanda Oswald can be found at www.PainCareClinic.co.uk.

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