

Keeping in balance

Y

ou can run 10 miles in an hour, but you can't touch your toes to save your life. Your knees are sore, you have shin splints, your hamstrings are tighter than a guitar string, your feet are aching. And your posture is terrible.

Sound familiar? There seems to be no end to the list of aches and pains, and injuries, from which runners suffer. We like to think of ourselves as strong and healthy, but 50-70% of runners seek medical treatment for running injuries.

Overtraining, biomechanical problems, tightness and imbalances in the muscular system, and running in the wrong shoes are just a few factors that can contribute to injury. Alone or in combination, these problems can conspire to sabotage the fitness you work so hard to achieve.

Unfortunately, there's no easy answer or cure for running injuries. But there are ways to take care of your body that will help you feel better and may help you prepare your body for the stress and strains of exercise.

Some runners swear by SOMA neuromuscular integration, a type of deep tissue bodywork that focuses on realigning the body's structure

and reconditioning the nervous system. Through deep tissue manipulation, movement training, and relaxation techniques, SOMA releases glued down tissues so that the body's structure can function more smoothly.

"The purpose of SOMA is twofold," says Denise Andersen, a SOMA practitioner, licensed massage therapist, and exercise trainer located in Seattle. "First, we want to improve posture, joint function, and body alignment, but we also want to help people develop a greater awareness of the mind-body connection."

The theory behind SOMA is that muscles become glued down as a result of activity, age, stress, injury, and living in gravity. When muscles become glued down, they are less able to reposition themselves, their movement is restricted and less efficient, and they are unable to maintain the body's optimal structural balance.

SOMA practitioners focus on manipulating the fascia (the connective tissue that surrounds the muscles) and the muscles to achieve a release that allows the muscles to move and function independently and smoothly.

Erika Dillman

The second aspect of SOMA theory concerns the reprogramming of the nervous system. Because the neural tissue is embedded in muscle tissue, the release of the fascia and muscles impacts the nervous system.

Marcia Nolte, a licensed massage therapist and an instructor at the SOMA Institute, believes that the release and softening of these tissues creates a more fluid base out of which the nervous system can operate. And as a result, the body can learn to respond differently to situations, and people can achieve a greater sense of self-awareness and self-reliance.

"What has been hardwired in the nervous system gets released," she explains. "The release gives the body physical options, as well as options in perception."

"For example, when you're sick the world looks difficult, it's a struggle. But when you're well, the world looks like a playground. SOMA can enhance that perspective of pursuing the world from a more self-reliant state. It reminds us that we can tune into the self-healing qualities that are innate in all of us."

How can SOMA help runners?

"The benefits to runners are numerous," says Andersen. "As a result of releasing the glued down tissues, and allowing the muscles to

function more smoothly, runners often find that they are more flexible and their style is more efficient."

Because muscles work in pairs and the systems of the body are all connected, tightness or injury in one muscle can cause problems in other parts of the body. SOMA addresses these types of problems because it balances the whole system, and by treating muscular imbalances and compensations, muscles that are released are able to support their appropriate structures. "When you have tight muscles that are glued down, they can pull on the joints at inappropriate angles that don't allow optimal functioning," adds Andersen.

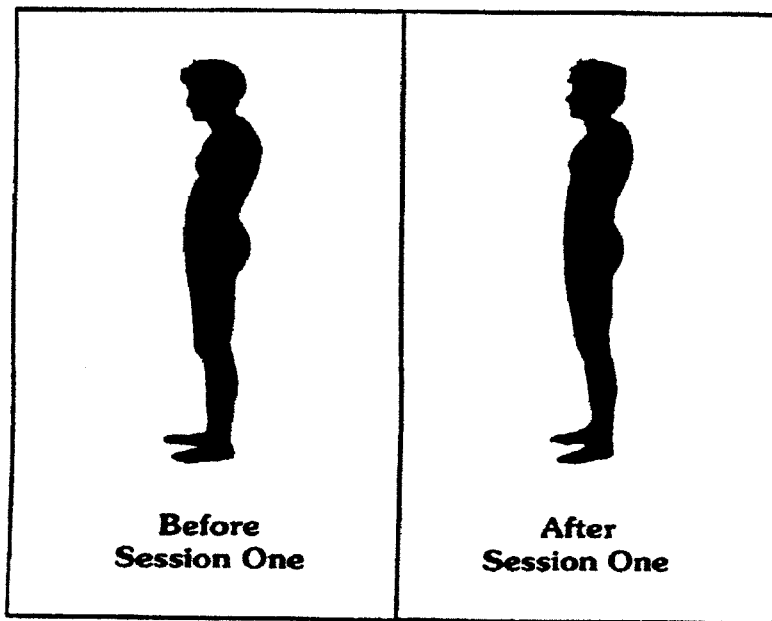
"It's important to keep balance throughout the body," explains Andersen, "you need to take care of muscular imbalances that happen when you're only doing one sport. You can be an elite runner, and win all your races, and still be imbalanced. And stressing the body with more training and racing on top of that can increase the likelihood of injury."

Andersen believes that SOMA, particularly in its alignment and repositioning of the pelvis, gives runners more energy and flexibility, which can translate into a more efficient style and greater endurance and speed.

"When the body is glued down, it takes more energy to move it. So if you can get the body aligned and balanced, you're not expending as much energy and you're less likely to get injured because your musculature is moving more freely and in a more integrated way," she maintains.

"I wish I could have had SOMA done years ago," laments Stephanie Levine, a 28 year old former world-

ranked pentathlete for the Canadian National team. "I was plagued with injuries." Levine competed on a world class level from 1983-1991, ranking 15th in the world in 1984, and trained over 20 hours a week at the various pentathlon events (running, horse riding & jumping, swimming, shooting, and fencing). Now living in Seattle and working as a



massage therapist, Levine runs 30-40 miles a week. She went through SOMA bodywork this past winter because she wanted to get a better sense of her body and to feel a greater sense of integration.

Levine has noticed several changes in her body since completing SOMA work. Her iliotibial band friction syndrome and knee pain have gone away, and she feels that her pelvis and hips are more aligned and balanced.

"The biggest change I've noticed," she explains, "is I feel that my muscles move as individuals rather than as groups. When I was competing I always felt thick in my muscles; now I feel more length. I feel lighter when I run, stronger, and more powerful."

Levine also notices that her recovery rate is vastly improved. Overall, Levine feels that she is more

connected with her body, and she thinks that will help her prevent injuries.

"I notice things sooner, I'm more in tune with changes in how my body feels."

Another Seattle runner, Frank Shuck, a 37 year old fire fighter and former running coach with PRs of 1:54 (800m) and 31:45 (10K), was

originally skeptical about SOMA but is now amazed at how the process has helped his injury problems. Shuck had a history of lower leg and calf injuries that often prevented him from running for weeks at a time. Through SOMA his muscular imbalances were addressed so that other muscle groups in the leg shared the work load. "I feel like I have more range of motion now," says Shuck, "my hips are freer, and my stride is longer and more efficient." Shuck also notices that he doesn't have the back pain that he

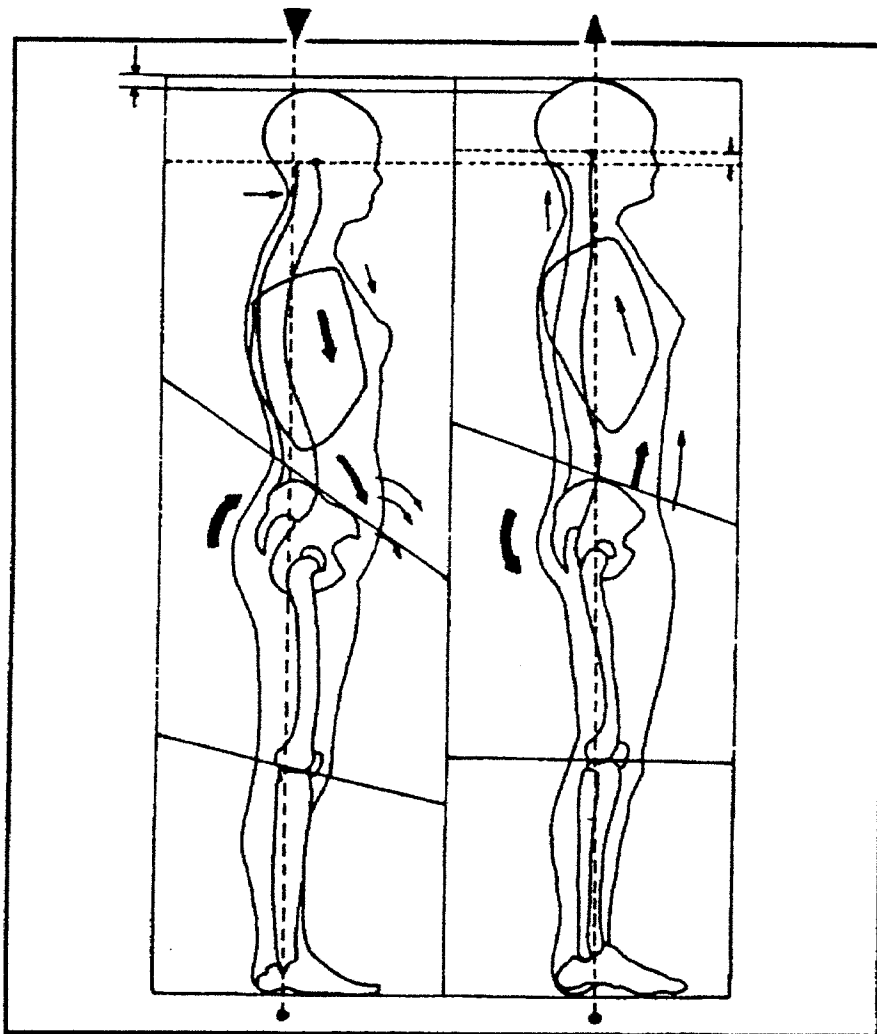
used to feel, and his arm action while running is more fluid.

One of the surprising results has been the emotional and intellectual improvements Shuck as experienced.

"I have this weird sort of confidence in my stature, in the way I hold myself," says Shuck. "I used to be a real slouch - my head and shoulders were too forward. Now I'm always looking in the mirror - waiting for that slouch to come back, but it hasn't so far."

Shuck also has more energy and feels that he doesn't have to work as hard to hold a standing position. "Now my skeleton is holding me up, not my muscles. And I'm more conscious and have a greater awareness of changes in my body. I don't tense up my shoulders as much, and

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Postural and cosmetic changes are often seen in the first sessions of SOMA Bodywork.

if I slump, I catch myself and straighten up."

All this improvement is not without hard work. As Shuck and Levine have learned, SOMA is not a passive treatment. Nor is it a cure-all.

"SOMA is about change," explains Andersen. "You have to be committed to changing your habits and paying attention to your body."

As part of the SOMA treatment, clients are given stretching and relaxation exercises. Clients are also instructed to develop new lifestyle habits that will support and integrate the bodywork.

"You can't expect SOMA to cure everything," cautions Andersen. "It's a release, and there's a whole other piece to it that is your involvement

and participation in the process. The more you put into the experience, the more you gain from it. If you're injured, you have to look at a lot of things - overuse, imbalances in the body, training, the shoes you wear. You can't go back to old habits."

SOMA bodywork is administered in ten 90-minute sessions, generally with at least a week between each session.

The process begins with a thorough discussion between client and practitioner. Clients are asked to fill out a questionnaire to help identify lifestyle habits, emotional and physical issues, and treatment goals.

"By clarifying issues and goals, you are beginning the mind-body integration process," says Andersen. "And you are entering into the work

with a greater awareness and responsibility for your body."

Although bodywork methods can vary from practitioner to practitioner, SOMA is generally defined by its cumulative approach to release. SOMA's deep tissue manipulation is done in sequences and layers, releasing the different areas of the body in stages.

And it is done with change as the goal. In the final sessions, the work is integrated to balance the entire structure, which Andersen describes as "connecting all of the bodywork into one flowing system."

Is SOMA painful?

It can be depending on how resistant to release an individual's tissues are.

Because the technique used to release the fascia and muscles is a coaxing action and not a forcing of tissues, clients can help the release by focusing their awareness and their breathing on the release area.

"The client is always in control," says Andersen. "If a procedure ever becomes painful, we stop."

Andersen says that if an area is painful, pain usually goes away with the release. She adds that, "Everyone responds to the work differently, so my goal is to work within the boundaries and comfort zones that are acceptable for each individual."

For runners seeking relief from their aches and injuries, SOMA is a great choice. While it doesn't promise to cure all injuries, it does start an important process of change.

By committing yourself to a holistic process like SOMA, you can begin to achieve a more balanced approach to exercise and more awareness of what your body needs to stay strong and healthy.

"I used to think of SOMA as this physical thing," says Shuck, "but the mind and body aren't separate. If your body is in alignment, your mind feels better. But you have to be aware - it doesn't happen magically."

For more information about SOMA, call Denise Andersen, B.A., L.M.P., at 362-4331. 