

Massage Today

The Road to Recovery: Beating an Injury with Gyrotonic Movement

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Over the last year and a half, I experienced severe atrophy in my legs as a result of an injury. I could barely walk up a flight of stairs without feeling exhausted. My legs and feet would cramp when I laid down at night, keeping me awake for several hours. I tried strength exercises, swimming, Pilates, massage, and structural integration. I worked with a nutritionist and tried magnesium injections. Nothing helped.

Since nothing else worked I decided to try the Gyrotonic method, which I had heard about for years. After doing two or three sessions a week for a month, my cramps disappeared and I began feeling stronger. Within two months, I had regained enough strength to walk upstairs without being exhausted. I began to feel like myself again. The most surprising part of this process for me was that I enjoyed it. Gyrotonic movement is fun, playful and feels natural.

History of the Gyrotonic Method

The Gyrotonic method of exercise was created about 40 years ago by Juliu Horvath, a Hungarian ballet dancer, to address his own severe injuries. He had a congenital abnormality in his lower spine, which made him vulnerable to severe low back pain. After being a principal dancer for the Houston Ballet Company, he spent 7 years in the Virgin Islands developing spinal motions and full body movement, that he found healing. He moved to New York City and began teaching and refining this system over the next 20 years, including designing and building a series of unique exercise machines that allow your body to experience almost every conceivable type — and direction — of movement.

Since Juliu developed Gyrotonic movement in the late 70's, the practice has spread far and wide, and has developed into a codified learning system with over 14,000 certified instructors in 72 countries.

What is Gyrotonic Movement?

The Gyrotonic Expansion System is unique in its ability to harmoniously address the entire person through specialized breathing patterns and rhythmic, circular and spiraling movement sequences. Gyrotonic exercises resemble a combination of swimming, Tai Chi, dance, and yoga. However, unlike yoga, which builds strength through poses, and Pilates, which is linear exercise, Gyrotonic movement increases strength and range of motion without strain or discomfort using a specific sequence of repetitive, undulating, and spiraling motions. I feel that it enhances the way the body functions in real life. I can now use my body more safely and efficiently, even in unusual positions such as crouching to find a lost sock under the bed. Previously, I would be afraid I'd hurt myself if I was put in such an awkward position.

This video (<https://youtu.be/CMzD8c3Hvwg>) shows one of the basic Gyrotonic motions — the "Arch and Curl." Arching occurs when you lengthen your spine and arch your back. This is followed by curling, which rounds the spine into the opposite position. To return to an upright position, start at the sacrum and gradually straighten the spine up to the neck while the abdomen is drawn in.

Notice how the spine moves sequentially — one vertebra at a time — through all different directions, producing a stretching sensation through movement. As a result, the body feels lighter, looser, and freer.

Shoulders and hips benefit from the circularity of these exercises. Joints which may be limited by scar tissue find greater circulation, freedom, and strength. Emphasis is placed on correct, yet sophisticated movement patterns, similar to dance. Here is another video example (<https://youtu.be/zKEBOShHrP8>).

Touch and hands-on assistance are key components in teaching Gyrotonic movement. When I'm done with my private lesson I feel like I've had a bodywork session. The Gyrotonic instructor is constantly guiding your breathing pattern, and both supporting and physically guiding your movement. Their hands (<https://youtu.be/0Tcjzg60aGo>) help to show your body a new, freer way to move.

As in massage therapy training Gyrotonic instructors go through extensive training and can attain various levels of expertise. Even before they start training they are required to be a client for a substantial period of time to understand the method in their own bodies. In level 1 alone, there are four courses totaling 188 hours. After the first level of training, students are required to apprentice for one year, including a 6-day supervised apprentice review course with a *master trainer*.

Benefits of Gyrotonic Movement

I think that Gyrotonic movement increases the range of motion (ROM) and functional strength of muscles, joints, tendons, and ligaments. It is popular among athletes and people dealing with the wear and tear of aging. The movement is thought to stimulate the lymphatic, nervous, and circulatory systems, as well as the fascial body. Other benefits of Gyrotonic movement may include decreased pain, increased flexibility, renewed energy, and a general sense of calm and wellbeing. This has been true for me and several of my clients. As the body learns to move safely and freely again, this can also have an emotional impact.

Why MTs Should know about Gyrotonics

It may serve as a complement for your clients who would like to be stronger and more flexible, or who are in the process of rehabilitating an injury. For massage therapists, this approach to movement may also help to counteract the physical effects of treating clients on a daily basis. You can see me and others here (<https://youtu.be/iXc1rL9XaZ4>), having an enjoyable time freeing their spines and working on their balance!

To learn more about this type of exercise please visit www.gyrotonic.com.