

A Holistic Understanding of Scoliosis

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The spine is a series of interconnected bones that form a column for the spinal cord to reside within. The spine not only is a container to protect this important structure, but the spine is also a place for muscles, ligaments and tendons to anchor onto. As a central column in our body the spine plays an important role in our health.

Under normal conditions the spine is not completely straight. There exists a small curvature in the lower region known as the “lumbar” curve. Higher up between the shoulder blades there is another small curve. This is called the “thoracic” curve. These curves are a normal part of the human anatomy, giving both strength and shock absorption to the body. When the spine begins to curve in a manner beyond what is already described, a condition called “Scoliosis” often develops. Scoliosis is the medical term that describes a curvature in the spine. While Scoliosis may affect 2-3% of the population, females are eight times more likely to progress to a curve that requires treatment. Usually the onset for Scoliosis is around puberty.

Most cases of Scoliosis are considered “idiopathic” under Western medical analysis. Idiopathic means that doctors do not know what the cause is. Traditional treatment may include placing a Scoliosis patient in a brace for several years, sometimes twenty-four hours a day. It is estimated that 30,000 children are placed in braces for Scoliosis each year. Another common treatment choice among Western medical doctors is surgery, where the bones of the spine are fused together or metal rods are inserted into the body alongside the spine. More than 38,000 spinal fusion surgeries take place each year.

While orthodox Western medicine treats Scoliosis as a disease, it is not actually a disease at all. Scoliosis is a symptom of a deeper issue in the body. There are many holistic approaches to Scoliosis that not only begin to correct the curvature but begin to address the real source of the problem. Unless we can diagnose a problem correctly we will continue to seek solutions that are misguided. With proper diagnosis we are able to provide proper treatment.

Scoliosis begins for most at the onset of puberty. One might want to ask what is going on in a child’s life at this time? A child’s body is changing into an adult body. Puberty is a time of growth spurts and sexual identity begins to emerge as well. Nature is saying that it is time to become a man or a woman and leave the world of children behind.

This is all well and fine except the fact that the child may not want to leave childhood behind. He or she may not be emotionally ready for these changes that are taking place. As nature is attempting to push the body up and out he or she is trying to hold it back in. The end result is that the body, and especially the spine, begins to form a curve.

Margaret was a client of mine who was diagnosed with Scoliosis as a young girl. She recanted her story to me during treatment. Margaret recalled how she was a young competitive gymnast. She performed well with her child’s body and feared growing up into a woman. As a woman she believed that she would develop hips and breasts which would

change her relationship with her body and she believed this would affect her gymnastic performance in a negative manner.

Because she did not want this to happen, Margaret recalled deliberately trying to make herself smaller. She consciously held her neck tight and contracted the skeletal muscles along her spine to try to ward off the laws of nature. Nature was pushing Margaret up and out while her little girl's mind was holding everything tightly down.

Margaret fought growing up. Becoming a woman was not an acceptable choice for her. She was not willing to let go of the competitive world of gymnastics. The upward and outward forces of nature had to go someplace. Her spine was the weakest link and began to form a curve. Margaret was soon diagnosed with Scoliosis with a significant curvature to her spine.

Patricia was a tall thirteen-year-old girl. She towered over the other kids in her grade, including the boys. When she entered into puberty she quickly took on the body of a woman. She especially developed very large breasts at her young age. This was not a comfortable situation for her. She was not emotionally ready for this body. When working with her years later as a forty-year-old woman, she told me that she tried to hide by pulling herself down and rolling her shoulders in. She would consciously attempt to make herself smaller to conceal her blossoming physique.

This self-imposed restraint that Patricia created helped Scoliosis to develop as her spine had nowhere else to go but to bend. The forces of nature were attempting to lift her up and out, yet her own uneasiness about her body tried to make her smaller. A natural question one might ask is, "Why does Scoliosis occur so much more frequently in young girls than in young boys?" There are two simple answers for this. First, boys have more freedom to be active. Even though it is more common now for girls to be involved in athletics and sports than ever before, boys are given more permission to go out and be active. In many instances, girls still must act like ladies and curtail their activity levels, even at an early age. Young girls might find their comfort zone while developing relationships with other girls (like sitting around and talking), while young boys are more prone to find themselves actively exercising (like while competing in sports).

When a child is active the muscles along the spine have more opportunity to stay warm and release any pent up tension. Consistent physical activity tends to prevent the hardening and shortening of the muscular forces that are prone to pull the spine off in one direction. A child who is consistently active will have less of a chance of developing Scoliosis.

The second reason that Scoliosis is more predominant in young girls is because of the overall anatomical differences between men and women. When young boys pass through puberty they do not blossom in the same manner as girls. Besides a few facial hairs and a deeper voice there is not much else that shows to the outside world. A boy's puberty is not as scrutinized as that of a young girl.

Most young girls will go through rather significant changes. Her hips will enlarge and she will develop breasts across her chest. There is no way to hide from the changes that are occurring. The puberty experience is present for everyone to see. Adding to this the fact that we live in a culture where women's bodies are often treated as objects to be glared at, it is no wonder why so many young girls are hesitant to go through this right of passage. It is more common for a young girl to want to hold back the laws of nature that wish to propel her into adulthood. She may not be emotionally ready for what is happening. Boys are often eagerly encouraged to grow up into "little men."

Another manner in which Scoliosis develops is not attached to the emotional onset of puberty. This occurs when a physical trauma or physical assault to the body prevents the

spine from growing properly. An accident or surgery at a young age is the most common way for this to occur.

Peter came to me as a forty-five year old man. He was suffering from severe back pain and a significant curve in his spine. Peter recalls that his problems began at eight-years-old when he had surgery for an infected gall bladder. The surgery created enough scar tissue around his spine to prevent the spine from growing properly. The scar tissue acted like a pulley that twisted his spine as his body grew through adolescence. It was not until years later that he realized there was a problem.

Treatment for Scoliosis

Almost nobody needs to have surgery for Scoliosis. Surgery should only be considered as a last resort. With holistic treatment, most cases are able to be healed and the spine returned to normal. I have adopted a three prong approach to healing Scoliosis. These three methodologies include **Bodywork**, **Expansive Movement**, and **Process Work**. Each method will complement the others.

The muscles along the spine have tightened up. The connective tissue that supports the muscles tightens up as well. This connective tissue is called "fascia." Over time, the muscles and fascia act like a vice to twist and pull the spine in a distorted manner. Physical manipulation of the tissue is often the first step in the healing process. Bodywork may include massage, chiropractic manipulation, or other types of modalities. With bodywork the physical tissues are stretched and adjusted to begin to release the patterns that have been in place. The spine does not move by itself. If the bones are curving to one side it is because the muscles and fascia have shortened and are pulling the spine out of alignment. While Scoliosis *involves* the spine, it is not *caused* by the spine.

I often work with a style called *Intuitive Connective Tissue Bodywork*. This methodology begins to stretch the fascia around the muscles. The results are that the muscles are free to relax and return to their normal shape. I find this technique very effective in treating Scoliosis. Whatever method of bodywork that you choose, it is important to begin to work out the physical structure of the body.

Expansive Movement

Scoliosis creates a condition where the spine is locked in a repressive pattern. Muscles and hardened fascia are pulling the bones of the spine off-center. When this occurs the body is locked in a rigid pattern. A body frozen in place will not heal itself. Movement is necessary to re-educate the body. The movement has to be the right kind of movement though. Much of our movement in our culture is contractive in nature. This is not what the body needs to heal from Scoliosis. Expansive movement is much more beneficial. Expansive movement is movement that elongates and expands the spine. Yoga, Feldenkrais, or Continuum are some of these types of choices. Movement of an expansive nature tends to take the fear out of movement. Movement that is done in a stressful or competitive manner will only make matters worse.

Expansive movement begins to lengthen the muscles along the spine to free up the pressure placed on the spine itself. The bones of the spine do not move by themselves. Muscles are required to pull the bones off-center. With expansive movement we retrain the muscles along the spine to come back into balance. When this happens the bones of the spine naturally find their appropriate location. The spine does not need to be strengthened, as some suggest. It is important that the spine and its surrounding tissues are re-educated.

Process Work

The muscles and fascia tissue that create the curvature in the spine do not do this arbitrarily. There is a story that the body and the mind are saying. Process Work begins to unravel and heal this story that has never come to completion.

If the initial injury to the spine was caused by a surgery or a physical trauma then the emotional impact of that experience needs to be released and completed. Helping a client to work through the many fears and uncertainties that were going on during the time of the injury or surgery is a large part of where Process Work comes in. It does not matter even though the injury might have occurred years or decades earlier. When accessed, the story within the body begins to be released. Process Work begins to uncover the fears and confusion about a client's body which has led to Scoliosis in the first place.

Questions are asked that might bring a person in contact with his or her initial feelings about her body during puberty. "How did you feel about emerging into a man or a woman?" "Were you supported at home while your body was changing?" "Were you emotionally ready not only for this new body but for this new way of experiencing the world?"

Conclusion

Scoliosis is not a disease; it is a symptom of a deeper issue. Manipulating the spine alone will not solve the problem. Surgery is only a last resort measure. Healing will happen when the beliefs about the origin of the problem begin to emerge. Re-educating the soft tissue around the spine will begin to create a dynamic new outcome.

A holistic approach to healing Scoliosis means one is willing to take responsibility for the source of the problem and also willing to take the necessary steps for its healing. Healing Scoliosis can happen at any age. It is always more beneficial to address something early on. However, something that has been around for decades can still be healed with the appropriate treatment protocol. The Western scientific model remains frozen in the belief that only your biology or biomechanics are responsible for the onset of disease or imbalances within the body. Nothing could be farther from the truth. When it comes to Scoliosis, the mind is quite capable of changing the shape of the spine, and in most cases, is the real source of this imbalance.

If you or someone you know is suffering from Scoliosis, just know that there is hope. While most mainstream medical doctors believe that nothing can fix Scoliosis, this statement is untrue. There are many natural and proven healing tools to bring the spine back into balance. Healing is not only possible, but it is nature's way.

Jon Burras is a Wellness Consultant and bodyworker. He is a champion for holistic healing and for allowing nature to be our strongest guide.

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