

Structural Integration for Persistent Pain



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Introduction

Many people are suffering from persistent, or chronic pain, and are looking for an effective way to find relief from pain. When we are talking about persistent pain, we mean the type of pain that sticks around after a period of 3 to 6 months or longer. Often there is not a clear answer as to why the pain is still there, and often investigations in what is going on, are not giving any clear answers.

There are so many treatment options out there that it is sometimes difficult to see the wood for the trees. What works for one person does not necessarily work for everyone, and this can be difficult and frustrating if you are trying to figure out what can be useful for managing your pain.

Structural Integration (SI) is one of these options, and can be useful for managing persistent pain. It is an alternative therapy and can be used alongside more conventional treatment options, this information booklet is to give you the information needed to decide if this is the right way forward for you.

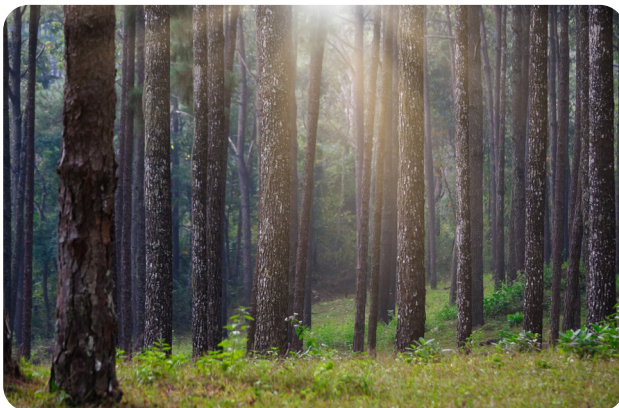


Figure 1 - Trees

What is Structural Integration?

Structural Integration is described by the International Association for Structural Integrators (AISI) as a course of somatic education, involving manual therapy (hands-on treatment) in combination with movement (exercise) and awareness.

It is a series (of usually 10-12 sessions) helping you to look into the possibility of change in how you use, and are feeling in your body.

Aiming to help the release of painful and stressful patterns of tension; effortful habits are replaced with feelings of comfort, ease of movement and improved posture, and promotes a sense of whole body connection. SI also takes into consideration the effect that mood and emotions can have on how we experience pain and how this can become a part of the pattern.

Structural Integration is based on the thought that tension, in the form of pain or stress, forms a compensation pattern, with restriction in movement and adopting a different body posture. It mainly focuses on biomechanical aspects and incorporates influences of thoughts and feelings that can relate to pain, stress or trauma.

At the start of your series of sessions the practitioner will take a comprehensive assessment of your situation, and will help you to set your goals, so that all your sessions are based on your needs and goals. The overall goal of SI sessions is to provide you with insights in your situation, and tools to manage your pain (1, 2).

Structural Integration is a body wide approach to pain management, so during the sessions the focus is not just going to be on the area where you experience your pain, but will look at you as a whole person, and looks at how you are holding and moving your body differently because of pain.



Figure 1 – Overview of the components of Structural Integration

Manual Therapy

The hands-on component of these sessions is mostly based on (myo) fascial techniques. Fascia is a continuous and complex network of connective tissue that you can find anywhere in our bodies. It is found wrapping around and through muscles (myofascia), it forms the tendons and ligaments that connects and hold the body together, it is wrapped around organs, nerves and blood vessels.

Fascia is providing the body with structural and functional support, and works together with all other systems to maintain balance throughout the entire being (3).

Structural Integration looks at how the body is holding tension in one area, and the effect this has on other areas of the body, everything is connected (4). When you are in pain it is a common response to place your body in different position and often brace against hurting it again.

During this part of the sessions prolonged pressure and stretch are applied to parts of the body by the practitioner. This aims to soften and lengthen the tissues, increases the fluid flow within the tissues and stimulates the nervous system to create a better awareness of where the body is in space and of the sensations felt within the body (5).

This all can help to decrease pain and improve function (6).



Figure 3- Everything is connected

Movement

Movement in Structural Integration can be separated into 2 different types; the movement participation during the manual therapy part of the sessions, and the movement component in the form of exercises and stretches that you are given to practice at home.

Movement comes in so many types and variations, and like with many other things there is not one type of exercise or movement that fits all. During the sessions you and your practitioner will explore the movement types and exercises that are suitable for you. Looking at what do you enjoy doing and what is feasible at this time.

Sometimes you will avoid to move a painful part of the body or move in a different way, and sometimes you avoid certain types of movement all together. Structural Integration can be helpful in relearning movement patterns, or look into alternative ways of achieving the movement.



Figure 4 - Movement exercise

Awareness

Awareness is also brought into the sessions in a few different ways; as part of how you are experiencing sensations in your body, awareness of where your body is and moves in space; proprioception. This can be affected by persistent pain and becomes a part of how you adapt your posture and movement (7).

Breathing and the breath plays a role in these sessions too, often when in pain the breath can become shallower and becomes a part of the compensation pattern. Breathing exercises can also be used as part of a relaxation practice.



Figure 5 - Breathing exercise

Breath awareness, relaxation and mindfulness/meditation practices can also be given as take-home practices. These practices, together with the exercises and stretches, will form the basis of the tools you will get to help you self-manage after your series is complete.

What does the research say about Structural Integration?

In this current day and age, we strive to deliver the most effective, safe and evidence-based practice. As in most alternative modalities the amount of research is small and the evidence is not conclusive, most research studies recommend that further studies are needed (5).

A study that has been done in comparing the SI series in low back pain with regular outpatient physiotherapy, shows that compliance with SI is higher. It also showed a reduction in pain intensity and an improvement in range of movement (8).

Another study has looked at the effect of SI on Fibromyalgia, it looked at the effectiveness not only in relieving pain, but also anxiety and depression. This study shows a reduction in all these aspects, but it has been a small study (9).

From a research point of view there is not much evidence for its effectiveness, and most of the success stories are anecdotal. It is important to take into consideration that this treatment, as is with most treatments of persistent pain, that it does not work for everybody.

The best results in managing persistent pain however have come from a combination of treatment modalities, so it could be that the combination of the interventions (manual therapy, movement and awareness) in Structural Integration is one of those modalities that could be helpful to you.

Where to find a SI Practitioner?

SI Practitioners or Structural Integrators are those who have completed a certified programme that qualifies them to offer these sessions. The International Association for Structural Integrators (IASI) has an international register of qualified practitioners where you can find a practitioner near you.

It is recommended to contact the practitioner before you start your sessions to ensure your practitioner feels able to help you with your specific situation.

Full series of sessions take around 10-12 sessions, most practitioners charge between \$100-\$200 per hour/session. Most practitioners offer shorter series of sessions as well, usually with a minimum of 3 sessions.



Figure 6 – Getting to know your practitioner first

The series is designed to be a complete treatment and at the end of this series you should have tools and skills to be able to manage yourself. However, some people continue with an occasional session to keep themselves on track.

Final words

Structural Integration is generally considered to be safe for most people and there have been no adverse events registered. It can help in a wide range of situations, not only for persistent pain.

Some people use it to enhance their sports performance and others to work on their posture.

Some people might experience some tenderness post session, but this is generally short lived (2-3 days), and is comparable with soreness after exercise.

Contra-indications are acute inflammatory or new injuries that have not been diagnosed or treated.

Alternative treatment options are osteopathy, physiotherapy, massage, yoga, Tai Chi, Feldenkrais.



Figure 7 - Structural Integration for persistent pain

Structural Integration as a treatment modality for persistent pain, an alternative and holistic approach to pain management.

Key Messages

Structural integration is a body wide approach to pain management, and includes manual therapy, movement and awareness.

Talk with your practitioner before you start your sessions, making sure it is the right fit for you.

The overall goal of SI sessions is to provide you with insights into your situation, and tools to manage your pain after the sessions have finished.

There is not much research to support the effectiveness and mechanisms of Structural Integration.

Structural Integration is generally considered safe for most people, and there have been no adverse events registered.

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