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By: Marianne Adams, MA, MFA

Abstract

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Exploring Stability and Freedom with the GYROKINESIS® Method

New somatic practice uses repeated movements, breath awareness and rhythmic patterns to loosen joints and ease muscle tension.

By Marianne Adams, MA, MFA

The GYROKINESIS® Method* is a unique form of somatic practice that is gaining popularity around the world. The Gyrokinesis Method promotes a holistic approach to health and well-being that could be useful to a variety of populations. Initially, the method gained popularity among dancers; however, its appeal has gradually broadened to larger fitness and rehabilitative populations.

During Gyrokinesis classes, participants are led through rhythmic, flowing movements that are designed to gently release tightness or adhesions in the joints. A fundamental aspect of the method is the creation of efficient movement patterns that feel good and are balanced and safe for the body and mind.

Gyrokinesis was developed by Romanian-born Hungarian Juliu Horvath, who was an avid swimmer, gymnast and dancer. While dancing professionally with the Houston Ballet, Horvath ruptured his Achilles tendon. This injury, along with other recurring injuries to his knees and back, ended his professional dance career.

To heal himself, Horvath spent six years on St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands developing his own unique, creative movement practice. Although he also studied yoga, tai chi, and meditation, he actively sought to create something new—something rooted in the rhythms and movements he observed in the natural world that would awaken the senses. In the early 1980s, Horvath returned to New York City and began teaching his new movement system, which he originally called Yoga for Dancers.

This article will introduce the Gyrokinesis Method and offer a few exercises that could be useful for common leg and gait issues.

Basic Principles

The GYROTONIC® and GYROKINESIS® methods are complementary exercise methods that fall under one umbrella, the GYROTONIC EXPANSION SYSTEM®. While Gyrokinesis exercises are performed using a chair, mat, or while standing, Gyrotonic exercises use various pieces of custom-designed Gyrotonic equipment.

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Horvath's movement system activates the entire body using spinal articulations and undulating rhythms integrated with specific breathing patterns. These breathing patterns are designed to stimulate the nervous system, open energetic pathways within the body, and oxygenate the blood. The method has been described as a gentle, flowing yoga that draws on movements from tai chi, swimming, dance, and gymnastics. A Gyrokinesis instructor typically guides a group by offering simple verbal cues and images while physically demonstrating the flow of movements. This style of instruction allows participants to follow along in real time and take personal responsibility for increasing body awareness. This structure also allows participants with different physical abilities the freedom to find their own way to embody the material.

Classes often start from a seated position with a guided self-massage and continue with basic spinal rocking motions. The rocking motion begins with the iliac crest of the pelvis tilting posteriorly, which rolls the ischial tuberosities anteriorly as the coccyx and sacrum begin to curl and activate the gluteals. As the pendulum of spinal motion begins to swing in the alternate direction, the ischial bones or "the feet of the spine" move toward the midline of the body to return the spine to an upright position. The rocking motion continues as the inferior pelvis and coccyx tip move posteriorly and the iliac crest moves anteriorly. The smooth, pelvic rocking energetically rises superiorly from the base of the spine and gradually builds into full body arching, curling, twisting, undulating, and spiraling.

The repetitive spinal motions allow the quadriceps to activate and release hip tightness through continuous motion. The femurs rotate externally as the spine arches. As the leg musculature and bones return to a parallel position, the hamstrings contract, the feet push into the floor and the pelvic muscles initiate a curl. The repeated rotation and release of the hip socket in conjunction with the pelvic arch and curl activates and strengthens the pelvic floor and core abdominal muscles. Through the coordination of lower body and spinal movements, the legs are strengthened, and the hips and low back gradually loosen. The simultaneous use of external and internal rotation at the hip joint and the activation of the hamstrings and quadriceps create a balanced and strengthened sense of alignment as they push and pull the legs in a seated position.

Somatic Concepts and the Gyrokinesis Method

Multiple terms have been used to describe various mind-body approaches: inward focus, mindful practice, internal body sensations, consciousness of intent or even spiritual aspects.¹ The Gyrokinesis method offers participants opportunities to attend and connect with an increasing awareness of sensations, which can lead to greater mindfulness in everyday movement choices. In their work on dance and somatics, Geber and Wilson wrote, "Somatic approaches help the individual find balance between tension and stress, efficiency and economy, and understand the natural aesthetic in movement."²

The Gyrokinesis Method encourages the development of mindfulness in motion in several ways. First, rather than mirroring or mimicking the instructor's movements, participants are encouraged to sense what feels good or joyful to them individually. Second, the use of repetition is framed as a way to make conscious choices rather than repeat misalignments or painful patterns without consciousness. Underscoring this is the idea that with each repetition of a particular movement, the participant can shift his or her mental state or change his or her focal point. Each participant can choose to continue focusing on fear of reinjury or holding onto feelings of stiffness or pain or consciously begin to sense pleasure in moving. With increased sensitivity to body awareness, the participant can sense when his or her joints are gently warmed and well lubricated. As range of motion gradually increases, the participant relaxes and settles into the pleasure of being in motion and "unstuck." The practice of being safely unstuck helps to build confidence as seated alignment mastery is gained.

Horvath's research using continuous, sequential spinal motions allows participants to make head-tail connections and move through homologous, homolateral, spiraling motions and contralateral patterns. These are fundamental patterns that babies practice and assimilate before learning to stand or walk. Practicing the seated spinal motions can help repattern inefficient habits and reduce muscle imbalances safely. The emphasis is always on creating effortless, balanced motion.

Another aspect that promotes mindfulness is the attention to conscious breathing patterns that are integrated into every movement.

[T]he Gyrokinesis method encourages the experience of a 'felt sense' emanating throughout the body as a fundamental precept of movement efficacy. The focus on conscious attention to intention within somatic methods helps to develop a sense of mindful awareness while moving.³

The use of repetitive action gives the participant the opportunity to become consciously aware of the sensations of release, loosening of the joints, and reduced tension in the musculature; it also allows the mind to make connections with new patterns and begin to focus on the intricacies of breath. Successive, repeated movements coupled with conscious breath awareness and rhythmic patterns help to reorganize the mind and body into a mindful synchronistic state, which also can soothe the nervous system.

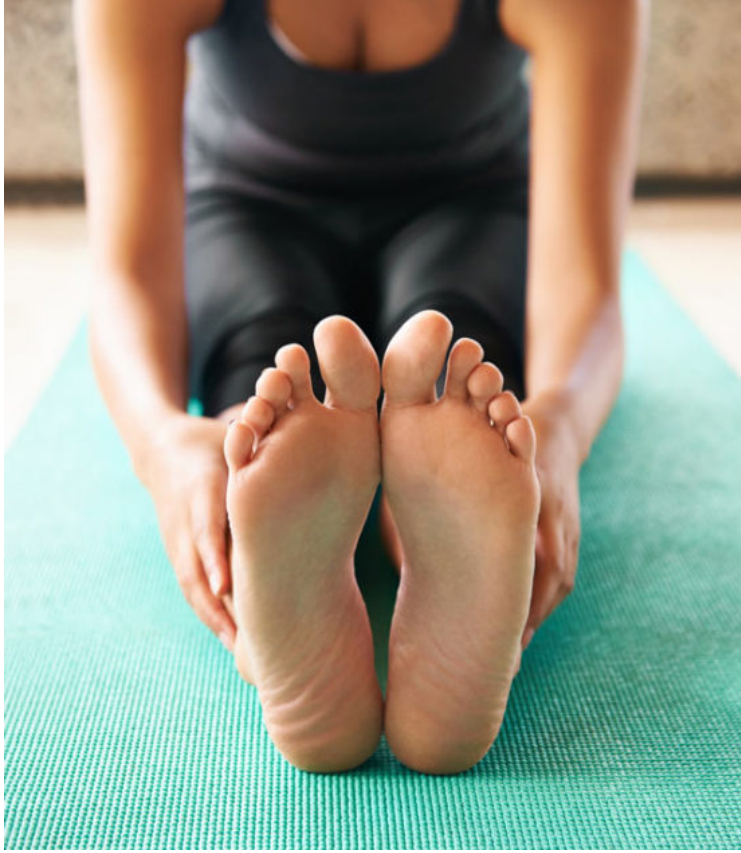
Permission to Embrace Change

One of the differences between the Gyrokinesis Method and other types of physical therapy is the mental state with which it is performed. While some rehabilitative methods might use the principle of "no pain, no gain," the Gyrokinesis Method gives participants permission to sense what feels balanced, pleasurable, and stable. Within this framework, participants have permission to not be the same and embrace change. This mindset helps participants avoid feelings of fear, pain, and stiffness, and avoid self-limiting thoughts. With each repetition of the movement, participants can choose to move with more ease, joy, and freedom, and with less restriction.

In figures 1–3, a model demonstrates a few select exercises that may be useful in leg and gait rehabilitation.

The Gyrokinesis Method can help participants rebuild strength, flexibility, and body connectivity. The method starts with seated exercises and progresses to increasingly challenging floor movements and standing exercises. The Gyrokinesis Method can help participants navigate the paradoxical interplay between experiencing body ease and ‘presentness’ during the healing process and honoring the fears that people hold naturally within their bodies after an injury. These habits are addressed indirectly in a Gyrokinesis class, as new patterns of plasticity emerge, and participants experience and explore pleasure in motion. As a body-mind approach, attention is placed on how to move with an emphasis on sensing the *felt* connections in the body. Cultivating non-judgmental body awareness allows participants to trust their bodies’ capacity, make connections, and build confidence in their bodies’ inherent wisdom.

Marianne Adams holds an MA in clinical psychology and an MFA in choreography and performance. She is a professor of dance studies at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. She has worked in therapeutic movement in several mental health settings and is on the graduate faculty at Appalachian for Expressive Arts and Bodywork.



Exercises that may be useful in leg and gait rehabilitation



Figure 1: The *inchworm* motion encourages articulation of the toes needed for balance, standing, and walking. The motion begins with spreading the toes apart and then pulling with the toes, curling the toes, and reaching back with the heels, gradually moving the feet forward and back. This exercise aids in sensing toe extension when standing, toe articulation in walking and helps to establish the sense of balancing on three points of the foot for optimal stability.



Figure 2: Imagine weight sharing in a triangular shape between the second and forth toe on the metatarsal pad and heel as needed for optimal balance.



Figure 3: A rocking motion is used to alternate the legs in the *seated leg extensions*. Participants are encouraged to open or release tightness in the back of the knee while sensing a gentle stretch of the hamstrings and gastrocnemius muscles. The gentle, repetitive rocking while in the seated leg extensions allows a participant to sense and release tightness not only in the posterior leg musculature but also in the back of the knee and hip joints. This exercise also helps a participant to sense balanced alignment through the 3 points of the foot as the knee flexes.



Figure 4: Softly practicing both eversion and inversion of the ankle joint allows the participant to safely roll the ankles in a non-weight-bearing position. This exercise increases range of motion of the ankle joint. The repetition of balanced motion in multiple planes and directions can increase joint strength and decrease adhesions formed from scar tissue.

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