



Rosen Method A Listening Hand

By Libby Gustin with Andrew Gustin

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— Marion Rosen,
Rosen Method founder

Today, doctors are increasingly baffled by patients' recurring aches, pains, and diseases. Often, unexplained issues are attributed to stress without exploring the source or helping people change how they experience their lives.

The body does not lie. It holds people's life stories, and, especially, their unexpressed feelings. This suppressed unconsciousness results in muscle tension that affects a person's bodily form and interferes with their ability to function. All the organs work harder because of the pressure and limitations of the breath. The immune system, which regulates the body's resistance to disease, is weakened. Where do clients turn when modern science cannot explain the pain in their bodies? Where do the possibilities for recovery exist?

Marion Rosen developed a bodywork modality named Rosen Method that works with the body's story. This method is specifically designed to help people express these suppressed feelings through a unique type of intentional touch. Interestingly enough, it's as applicable for us as practitioners as it is for our clients.

As bodyworkers, we may contact these suppressed feelings through our touch whether we realize it or not. But simple touch is usually not enough to provide an opportunity for expression and release. By touching the body with awareness in a nonjudgmental manner, we give a greater opportunity for clients to express what they have had to lock away in order to survive their life experiences. Expression of these feelings in a safe environment permits the muscles to release. Contacting these muscular holdings with “a listening hand” allows the client to access the source of their pain and patterned ways of experiencing the world.

Rosen Method stands both as an independent modality and as a possible enhancement to bodywork or massage therapy. Its technique of listening to the body can benefit all bodyworkers seeking a deeper understanding and appreciation of themselves and their clients. Rosen practitioners develop the ability to track subtle changes in the body, such as shifts in breathing and posture, that indicate changes in a client's internal experience. Given Rosen Method's ability to enrich all healing modalities, let's take an in-depth look at this work.

Holding

To really understand the impact and limitations of muscle tension, try this simple exercise. Reach your arms out in front of you and then pull them back (see the photo below). This motion starts from the area between your shoulder blades. Squeeze your shoulder blades in toward themselves and now try to reach out. Your ability to reach is very limited and requires more effort. This is how your muscles respond to shield you from pain.



Test the impact of muscle tension by extending your arms, then trying to pull them outward while pulling in your shoulder blades.

Protection is a learned mechanism we use to keep safe the vulnerable aspects of ourselves. Sometimes we need protection to avoid becoming an easy target, but we also need to know how and when to disengage from this safeguard. For most of us it is fearful to be open. Our ability to access strength is limited if we feel the need to be protected at all times. It also limits us from knowing ourselves. Marion Rosen says, “Knowing your whole truth is needed to live up to your fullest potential.” The Rosen Method does not take away clients’ barriers or protection, but brings them to a place of choice through awareness.

At the heart of the Rosen Method is the belief that chronic muscle tension comes from the suppression of feelings. When adults deny their feelings, they become stuck in a holding pattern that causes chronic pain and leads to unhealthy emotional patterning in relationships. This also limits the fullness of breath.

Most children breathe in all parts of their body. This allows them to feel and express strong emotions, such as anger or sadness, as they are experienced. Shortly after the feeling leaves their body, they are free to find their joy again. As individuals mature, they learn to restrain their feelings. When they continually don’t feel safe to show their feelings or their true selves, they become conditioned to hold back through muscle tension. Often they are not aware of these holdings and this tension becomes a common part of how they exist in the world.

In turn, these holdings inhibit breath from reaching the contracted parts of their bodies. Have you ever received bodywork and suddenly felt a tightness or soreness of which you were previously unaware? This is a good indication of how a person will unconsciously hold or contract muscles. Rosen Method is a unique combination of non-intrusive touch and talk that bridges this gap between the unconscious mind and body.

These unconscious holding patterns are often the result of traumatic events. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) results from a traumatic life experience such as an auto accident. Trauma is defined as the freezing in our bodies of our natural responses to danger (flight/fight mode), not the triggering event. This causes entrapped pain patterns in the body that can be physiological, structural, and emotional. The unresolved residue can surface from seemingly unrelated stimuli. The brain loses the capacity to sort between the emotional memory of past trauma and

the current experience. This strips the body’s ability to naturally recover and adds additional layers of repression. Unless individuals acknowledge the depth of their trauma, the pain and emotions are still held in their bodies.

A few years ago I experienced PTSD. As I was carrying my bike into the house, I hit my lip on the handlebar and split it open. Once I was able to stop the bleeding, the pain seemed to subside, but I was stuck in the shock. I felt lost and found it difficult to get out the door to attend my Rosen class. During class, I felt out of sorts and wanted to escape. In order to stay, I volunteered for a Rosen demonstration. At the beginning of the session, I was aware of the hands touching me from the outside but was unable to feel them from the inside. As the session continued I came to understand that I was unable to feel because I was not in my body; I was preventing my body from doing what was necessary to get through the shock. This smaller trauma triggered a bigger hurt.

As the session progressed, I remembered a car wreck that happened when I was 4 years old, in which I split my head open. My mom's first concern after the accident was for my baby brother, who was only 18 months old. I had to show her my injury to get her attention. My body learned how to cope by disconnecting at a young age. The trauma of the bike mishap brought my body back to the response I learned when I was 4 years old. I was unable to distinguish between the bike accident and the car accident. Through the Rosen Method, I found the safety to return to my body and fully experience the pain with awareness. I no longer felt the need to run, and the next day my lip was completely healed.

Another common holding pattern is a tight or limited diaphragm. Because the diaphragm is the breathing muscle dividing the upper and lower body, its functionality is crucial to an individual's well-being. This muscle is connected to the upper body through the sac around the heart and to the lower body via the lumbar spine. Back pain is often the result of a tight diaphragm. Frequently clients attribute pain to a physical incident, but when they are unable to get relief through traditional treatment they come to realize the pain is a product of an emotional holding in the unconscious. When the diaphragm softens, the holding around the heart and lumbar softens and allows genuine feelings to surface.

Marion Rosen was working on a woman who experienced pain in her back that did not respond to treatments from back specialists. The woman told Rosen the backache began after she had painted her ceiling. As Rosen worked on the woman's diaphragm at T12, she inquired why the woman had not gotten help painting. The woman displayed great anger and emotional pain as she talked about how her boyfriend, with whom she had bought the house, left her for another woman in the middle of fixing it up. The tightness around her diaphragm and behind her heart began to soften as the woman told her story. While expressing how difficult it was for her to shoulder the house responsibility, her diaphragm released and the pressure on her lower back was relieved. By meeting the holding, she was able to access her emotions, and her back pain disappeared. When a holding is met, the resources are freed that have been suppressed, making them available for a fuller approach to life.

Meeting

The Rosen Method approach to meeting a holding is to contact the muscle tension, use a listening touch and a receptive presence, and allow access to the emotion beneath the barriers. Using a receptive touch, a practitioner will meet the outer edge of the muscle contraction, remaining with it as it softens.



The Origins

Marion Rosen is the 89-year-old founder of the Rosen Method. She is still energetically practicing and teaching her method in centers across the United States and Europe. Her training traces back to the 1930s in Munich, Germany, where she studied German breath massage, the seminal work of Elsa Gindler. Rosen also became a licensed physical therapist. As she touched clients, she noticed their stories came forth. She became aware of the deep impact touch has on the body. Synthesizing her knowledge, and adding her own element of verbal communication, she developed the Rosen Method. She is widely known for her ability to treat psychosomatic ailments and for her transformational sessions where clients discover their true selves.

This creates space for the client's truth to surface. Touch provides an awareness in the body's cells that goes beyond intellectual knowing. When people are touched in a non-aggressive manner, oxytocin (a hormone) is released, allowing for relaxation of the muscle.

Acting as guides, Rosen practitioners listen with their whole presence, paying attention to subtle changes in the client's breath, musculature, and facial responses. Coming to the table with a deep curiosity, practitioners allow space for the unconscious to emerge. These subtle shifts in the client indicate emerging truths. By having no expectations, practitioners can receive what comes forth, even if it is not verbal.

As clients tell their stories, trained Rosen Method practitioners listen with their ears, eyes, hands, and hearts. They are looking for authentic expressions as the experiences unfold. Practitioners notice the connection between the clients' words and their breath. When the truth is accessed, the muscle tension softens and the breath flows with ease. A place that was limited to receiving breath can now move without effort. Practitioners support the emergence of this truth into the conscious mind by asking questions and listening without judgment. Clients connect long-forgotten feelings and/or memories to the holdings in their bodies.

Kelly, who had a skiing accident 20 years ago, had severe pain in both of her knees. After five surgeries, physical therapy, and endless treatments, the pain persisted. During a Rosen treatment, the practitioner inquired about the holding in Kelly's legs. She explained that on her last ski trip with her father she had to rent a pair of skis that were too long because the rental shop had run out of her size. Although she is an experienced skier, she asked her father not to lead her down any mogul runs. Her father, being very familiar with this mountain, led her down a challenging mogul run anyway. Toward the end of the run she fell. Although she knew she had injured both of her knees, she told her father she was fine. He continued skiing while she went to the hospital alone. She knew her story very well, yet she had not allowed herself to experience the deep hurt she felt. Through Rosen, she was able to access the emotional trauma still locked in the muscles around her knees, which was preventing her from fully healing. The next day Kelly had minimal pain in her knees and significantly more movement.



Marion Rosen's modality works with the body's story and often integrates movement training. Photos courtesy of The Berkeley Center.

Motion Equals Emotion

Long-held tension can inhibit our body's natural healing processes and ability to move freely. When our bodies hold tension, the muscles compress joints causing less mobility. Another important aspect of the Rosen Method is the movement class. As a response to clients' requests for an alternative to physical therapy, Marion Rosen started movement training to bring all the joints through their full range of motion. Rosen Method movement classes help people regain movement through playful exercise while working their muscles and lubricating joints.

Through these movements, individuals contact the areas of holding and discover easier ways of being and moving. Most of the movements tug on the diaphragm and are designed to allow more space in the body and mind. One result of this tugging is the restoration of the natural breath, a hallmark of the Rosen Method. The simplicity of the movements and the pausing in between allows students to go deep into the body, creating shifts in their habitual holding patterns. The movement teacher invites the students to become aware of these patterns. This is done spontaneously and without judgment as it leads to new possibilities — physically and emotionally. In this way, Rosen Method movement classes help students use their bodies in accordance with their natural design so they can move with ease and live more fully. →

A Place of Choice

Rosen Method can give clients the chance to live more freely. They can experience more flexibility and, in turn, more choices in life. When one feeling is held back, it influences all other feelings. For example, allowing experiences of sadness gives access to feelings of joy. When clients release a deep-rooted emotion from the past, their faces change. People who have benefited from Rosen Method compare it to a spa treatment, saying they become more beautiful as their whole being becomes more visible.

Hans Axelson first experienced the method when he volunteered in a class Marion Rosen was teaching at Axelson's Gymastika Institute in Sweden. During the session, he experienced a buried memory of his father dunking him under water while teaching him how to swim. He sobbed as he recalled how this experience made him feel as if he was going to drown. As he cried, his chest opened up allowing him to breathe more deeply. This created more than an opening in his chest; it affected the relationships in his life. Following the session, a woman who had studied at his institute for seven years and never dared speak to him, hugged him. The enrollment at Axelson's institute, which had remained the same the past 20 years, doubled the following year. Axelson enrolled in Rosen's classes at his institute. As he went deeper into his experiences, he changed from being reserved and quiet to being warm and available. Since that time, enrollment at Axelson's Gymastika Institute has increased 45 times its original

size. His choices have made a tremendous impact in his life. Axelson has since created classes throughout Scandinavia to train people in the Rosen Method.

Freedom

Today we live in a predominately masculine culture creating limited possibilities for both men and women. Society's idea of strength as a masculine quality is often equated with being hard — not letting emotions interfere with our accomplishments. When we wear our armor, we react to a person instead of meeting them. We are given the message early in our lives that sensitivity is a weakness, and in order to survive in this world we must learn to suppress this part of ourselves. To hold back is often associated with strength, but it is our full potential we are holding back. When we allow the sensitive part of ourselves to exist with awareness, we are able to fully relate to others with compassion and understanding instead of being defensive. The true meaning of strength is not being hard but expressing all aspects of who we are. When we have no muscle tension, it takes less energy to move, and we have a much broader range of motion. If a muscle is already tense, the body cannot contract and protect itself. Real strength comes from softness. When people access this softness within and gain the freedom to express it without fear, their relationships begin to change.

Rosen Method can not only impact a person's personal growth and transformation, but also has a profound effect on all aspects of a person's life. We are all full of love, but often we lose access to it. Experiencing love can be the most precious feeling we have, so it is the one we protect the most. Rosen gives us the ability to meet others with our whole being, allowing us to access this love.

A teacher at a San Leandro, Calif., middle school uses the Rosen Method to relate to his students. When challenged by his students, he models positive behavior instead of rising up in defense. He listens with receptive attention to what they are bringing forth, responding without judgment. Realizing someone cares enough to listen to them, students let go of their defenses and bring forth the real issue. When someone studies or receives Rosen, they find it is not limited to the experience on the table — it is a way of living.

Rosen with Other Modalities

As illustrated above, Rosen Method can have a tremendous impact on your life. Learning Rosen Method helps you access more space in your body, which in turn influences how you touch your clients. You have a relaxed, curious presence with no agenda, allowing you to hear the dialogue from your client's body. Through this presence, your other modalities can become more effective. →

How has being a Rosen Method teacher/practitioner impacted you?

"I feel privileged that I have the opportunity to teach Rosen Method bodywork and movement, as well as working with individual clients. It is a healing modality that continues to change me as well as those that I have worked with over the last 20 years. In a step-by-step manner, the work continues to evolve as I do. The levels of deep love and acceptance that I feel in my being are transmitted to those I work with through our interaction together. The emotional healing is so simple and effective. It allows each person's deeper self to emerge from acknowledging the parts of themselves that have been buried. This is what drew me to Marion and keeps inspiring me."

— Jane Malek, Monterey, Calif.

Sciaticare is a modality that treats clients suffering from sciatica and disc-related injuries in the back. In a recent sciaticare session, I covered my client with a blanket to keep her warm, and she started crying. The sensitivity with which I covered her reminded her of the lack of nurturing in her life. I continued the sciaticare bodywork using a Rosen presence and dialogue. Her tension softened, the area around her heart opened and the muscles around her lumbar released, allowing me deeper access to the disc-related injuries in her back.

When clients are able to shed their armor by expressing the protected emotion, the practitioner has greater access to their bodies and can touch them more deeply. From my experience, Rosen plays an essential role in all other bodywork modalities and talk therapy. Through a Rosen presence you can learn to touch your clients in a manner that allows you to reach new depths in their healing.

Another example of how Rosen enhances other modalities comes from Kate O'Shea, a practicing physical therapist of 23 years. Like many in her field, O'Shea was exhausted from treating 14 patients a day. Through receiving and practicing Rosen, she found more space for herself, which in turn made her more available to her clients. "By learning how to care for myself as I worked with my patients, I became a better physical therapist," O'Shea says. "Through a listening touch and tracking the changes in breath, I have learned to recognize big, but subtle changes in my clients that attributed to their relief from pain. I have more fun, energy, and enjoyment as a physical therapist."

O'Shea, who also studied Rosen movement, finds it helpful in identifying where movement stops in her clients during physical therapy. She uses it to warm up joints in her clients with balance challenges. One client who limped into the clinic with a cane was able to dance to Frank Sinatra. Once the client realized her potential, she stopped using her cane. Rosen movements are simple to teach and clients can continue doing them at home or at a community Rosen movement class. According to O'Shea, "The best part is I get to move, too, as I treat. Because of this, my body has changed. My ability to teach patients how to move out of painful movement patterns grew as I learned how to get out of my own constraining habits of movement."



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Transformation

Rosen Method bodywork begins with the individual and her personal growth. It introduces clients and practitioners to a new way of being and a new way of communicating with people. Reaching new depths of being leads to action and has a ripple effect in the world. Rosen Method work is more than an opportunity for individual transformation. It can transform relationships at home, at work, and in the community. The possibilities are endless. Whether it is for your own personal growth, to deepen your current practice, or as an independent modality, Rosen allows you to access your possibilities and brings you to a place of choice to live life to your fullest potential. Imagine a world where everyone is living to their fullest potential instead of being armored and defensive. Rosen Method offers transformation within, which leads to transformation around. **M&B**

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