

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a person in silhouette, seen from the side, reaching their right arm up towards the sky. The person is wearing a light-colored t-shirt and dark leggings. The sky is a vibrant blue at the top, transitioning into a warm orange and yellow glow from a low sun. In the distance, there are silhouettes of mountains or hills. The overall mood is one of inspiration and movement.

Connected Fitness for Body & Mind: A Movement Manifesto

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Fit For What?

What is physical fitness? Ask five different people, and you might get five different answers. For some, it's about strength, agility and cardiovascular conditioning. For others, a fitness routine is a means to an appealing physique. For some, it's about maintaining a level of health that they hope will prevent the onset of disease. For still others, fitness activities can be a way to support mental health. Maybe it's all of these. Maybe it's none! Fit for what? Have you ever thought about what fitness really means to you?

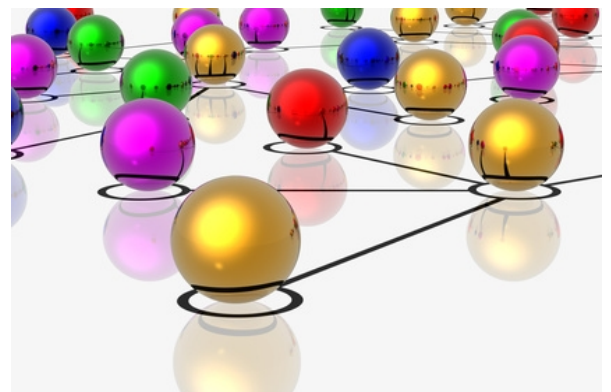
The concept of physical fitness for all moved from virtual obscurity in the 1950's to a multi-billion dollar industry today. Over the years, we all got lost in the metrics of individual elements of fitness: the amount of weight we lift, the speed and distance we move, or the calories we burn. We forgot that fitness is about a lot more than just muscle!

Here's the thing: fitness is not about the gym. It's not about trendy new workouts or zen stretches. It's not about strength at all costs. Fitness is about having the strength, stamina, mobility and resilience to move through your life with energy and ease. ***Move through your life.***

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It's time to remember **WHY** we move and work our bodies. If all you are interested in is a little sweat - burning calories & hitting some magical number on a scale, or lifting an ego-boosting amount of weight - then you probably won't be interested in what follows. But if your goal is fluid, easy movement that connects you better to your body and allows you to lead your life to the fullest, with passion and energy, read on!

Fitness and health are all about connections! Our bodies are an intricate web of interconnected systems. The dynamic relationships between these systems will determine, to a large degree, the state of our overall health and fitness.



For years, fitness professionals focused on strengthening individual muscles, with the belief that a steady and linear increase in load would lead to improved performance. There is evidence that this approach produces a particular kind of positive results. These results are, overall, how fitness is still measured today. But is that the whole picture? The human body is much more than the sum of its parts.

With all that in mind, it's easy to imagine that there are many people who are not well served by this one-size-fits-all approach.

Perhaps you're one of them?

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Do any of these statements ring true for you?

- ♦ I am fit and active, but I'm finding that movements that were once easy to achieve feel less fluid and are taking more effort. There are some activities I'm cautious about, and some I've even given up on completely.
- ♦ I just cannot seem to stick to a fitness program.
- ♦ I'm an athlete, and I get great coaching about techniques to help me excel in my sport - but my body is feeling trashed! Sometimes I wonder if my body will survive the sport.
- ♦ I have this bad (*insert body part here*) that keeps me from participating in the activities I like doing most. I figure it's just a part of getting older.
- ♦ I seem to keep getting injured!
- ♦ No matter what people say, exercise doesn't feel good to me.

Imagine how would it feel to train in a way that puts **YOUR** body first? Wouldn't you love to learn to challenge yourself while listening to the needs of your own body in a way that creates ease and fluidity; reducing stress on your entire system? Imagine discovering untapped or previously wasted stores of energy in your body that you could use toward relaxing into movement, improving stamina, unleashing explosive power or supporting increased range of motion? I love to see the possibilities that open up for people when they embrace a more integrated way of training. And I want those things for you too!

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Attention & Connection

We live in a world FULL of technology. Technology has given us access to an incredibly wide spectrum of information, and created wonderful ways to track our individual metrics. But it's a double-edged sword. We seem to have become more connected to our gadgets than to our own bodies!



We rarely communicate with each other face to face anymore. We connect via social media on our computers and smart phones. We travel in cars to buildings with elevators and work in jobs that require us to sit for long periods of time. We wash our clothes & dishes in machines that do most of the work for us. The most determined of us will take an hour or two a day to “work out” - but the full body movement that was once a part of everyday living is GONE.

So what do we do?

Just as a relationship with another person requires attention, the relationship we have with our own bodies requires some work too. When we can connect to ourselves, and to the dynamic relationships within our own bodies, we open up to a deeper integration of body, mind, emotion and spirit. Honouring the relationships between these dimensions of ourselves during our movement and fitness activities is a powerful way to grow, and optimize every aspect of our potential! You matter. Let's operate with that as our fundamental value. You matter. And how you move matters.

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Breath

Breath. We take it for granted. We breathe in, we breathe out. We don't have to think about it. It just happens. And yet, breath ties into everything we do. Breath supports posture and acts as the bedrock for the function of almost every system in the body. It unites the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Breath connects spirit to form. It relates "being" and "doing." The ability to breathe with ease and efficiency provides a calm, responsive foundation for every movement in the body.



Understanding which systems can be impacted by breath pattern dysfunction, and learning to observe when that dysfunction is at play can go a long way to improving cardiovascular function. It can also work to inform the pace at which an athlete can progress in a healthy way, with manageable stress on other systems. If challenge to the cardio-respiratory system causes constant dysfunction in other systems, an eventual break-down of some sort is inevitable. Learning to recognize what kind of stress on the body is positive and what kind of stress is "too much" is essential for healthy, life-long physicality.

On the other side of the coin, learning to use great breath patterns to support posture challenges and instabilities can go a long way toward improving performance too. Breath patterning affects so many different systems that once it improves, people often experience sudden improvements in strength, stamina and flow that seem unrelated to breath. The change is not magic, but it can seem that way to someone who has been struggling to achieve his/her goals without success and without really understanding what's getting in the way.

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Breath is a platform for fitness. A springboard. If the springs aren't loaded properly, there won't be much "sproing," and the body will have difficulty meeting potential. Understanding where things can go awry, and recognizing the signs of dysfunctional breathing are critical pieces in improving cardiovascular fitness and performance, postural training and/or structural rehabilitation. Otherwise, up-training cardiovascular endurance may also be up-training a poorly loaded structure, creating a whole host of other problems. It's all about connections. That breath is a system so intricately woven into the fabric of the moving body deserves our deepest respect and a sophisticated training approach - not just a do or die attitude.

Core Stability

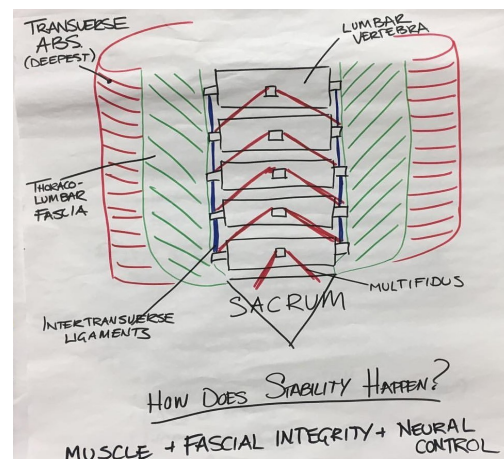
What is core stability, really? And how do we train for it? Contrary to popular belief, strong abdominal and back muscles are not the whole picture. I have worked with many wonderful people who have beautiful, "ripped" and rock hard abs, but for whom a lack of structural stability has been an important factor in dysfunctional movement and pain. At first, these fit folk had difficulty understanding why, for them, stability was an issue - when clearly they had done the "core work" they were told they needed to do!



Sometimes, in pursuit of the perfect "six-pack," we focus way too much on building the vanity muscles, and don't sufficiently target the deep structures that actually provide structural support for the spine. Training the core for structural stability is, once again, all about connections.

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The body's deep system core musculature is made up of four structures: the respiratory diaphragm, the transverse abdominus, the lumbar multifidus and the muscles of the pelvic floor. When the deep system is strong and responsive, the pelvis and spine are generally fairly well supported.



This is a good thing; but is it the whole story? Definitely not. True core stability is achieved through an integration of muscle, fascial tissue, and neural control. In my experience, coordination, balance and INTEGRATION of these pieces are the keys.

Any exercise program with a goal to create true, functional core stability must include the following:

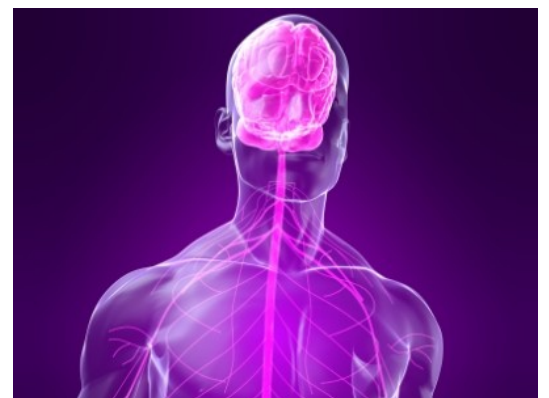
- ♦ education as to the specific components of the inner unit and its relationship to other structures, increasing both intellectual and felt-sense awareness;
- ♦ identification of client's current stabilizing strategies, and a deconstruction of inefficient patterning;
- ♦ evaluation of potential fascial tissue deficits that may affect the integrity of the whole core mechanism;
- ♦ strengthening, coordination and well-timed activation of specific muscle groups, in relation to each other, in various movements, leading to ease of motion in the WHOLE body.

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Finding and maintaining real core stability is an exciting dance where the persistent and curious find their way. The resulting ease in the body can feel like new-found freedom! There is no quick fix... just an intriguing process whereby the body becomes better and better equipped to handle itself in the world. So yeah... go ahead and train for those ripped and rockin' abdominals if that's what turns you on. But a Ferrari is no fun if you don't know how to drive it. Make sure you learn how those abdominal muscles relate to other structures, and how they contribute to your overall stability & movement - and train them accordingly.

Nervous System Balance

The human body's autonomic nervous system (ANS) is divided into two parts: the sympathetic, in charge of "fight, flight or freeze" responses, and the parasympathetic branch, which is all about "rest and digest." While both systems are constantly at work in the body to some degree, they become more or less active depending on what we're doing, how stressful it is, our emotional state, how well rested we are and even on our nutrition.



These two branches of the system enable us to respond appropriately to the world around us, and to look after the inner needs of the body. The ANS plays an important role in maintaining what's known as "homeostasis" in the body. Think of homeostasis as being a little like the graphic equalizer on your stereo. Just as the sound coming out of your stereo changes when the levels on the graphic equalizer change; the body responds differently to the different levels of input from your nervous system. The body should be able to handle spikes and drops in those levels, but it should be able to return to a happy norm once again.

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Sometimes though, that balance is upset and the body's "normal" is reset to a level where either one branch of the ANS or the other continues to exert a more assertive influence, upsetting the old balance and setting a new one. We rarely even notice it's happening - until we don't feel good in our bodies anymore. In our fast-paced, stressful world, the imbalance I see most often is an overly sympathetic system. What does this have to do with training and physical fitness you ask? Actually, quite a lot.

The old chestnut trotted out in anatomy classes to remind students about the nature of the sympathetic nervous system is something like this: "the sympathetic system helps you either fight off an attacking tiger, or run away fast." Heart rate accelerates and blood pressure increases. Muscles tense in preparation for flight. Pupils dilate, mental focus narrows to just the matter at hand. And the digestive system slows too. (Digestive issues would be inconvenient in the midst of a fight with an angry tiger.)

The trick is, though, that these days, the tiger isn't really what we have to respond to on a regular basis. We deal with stresses of a different kind: crazy traffic from all directions on the way to work, information overload, electronic devices that require our attention, the kids needing mom, the boss demanding that re- port... right now. Money stress, work stress, family stress, emotional stress: it all adds up. What happens is that the body responds to these stresses in a somewhat similar way to when you see that tiger. Except that that adrenalized, sympathetic nervous system response becomes a chronic and extended one.



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Popular media has reported studies that show stress creates elevated levels of cortisol, which among other things, can affect how the body handles blood sugar. It may also make it difficult for people to sleep at night. Both of these can have a profound effect on feelings of well-being, and make it hard to maintain a healthy weight. But the body responds in other ways too.



In sympathetic drive, the body tenses up. The muscles become chronically tense and twitchy, ready to defend us from the seemingly endless stream of things requiring our attention RIGHT NOW. Tension masks sensation, so it's harder to feel what's going physically, and likely emotionally too. When muscles are tense, the flow of fluid motion is interrupted. The body has to invent compensations to restore what feels like smooth motion. Those compensations accumulate in the body exponentially, and the likelihood for injury or illness goes up. Recent evidence also indicates that sympathetic overload may actually inhibit the proper firing of slow-twitch endurance muscle fibers. Since our slow-twitch muscles are largely responsible for our posture and stability, that's important information for endurance athletes, and for anyone who wants balance and stability!

We need to pay more attention to both sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the nervous system in our fitness programs. Our culture is addicted to getting big results right now. We want to be fast, strong and agile - yesterday. It can feel fantastic to work the body in an intense way. But we have to question: when is the load demand we put on our bodies helping to build overall capacity in our bodies, and when is it costing us in other ways? Pain is not weakness leaving the body, as a popular expression goes. Pain is just pain.

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A well-rounded fitness program needs to include elements that encourage autonomic flexibility, giving a body the ability to move easily between the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. Sometimes it's about restorative practices. Sometimes it's about changing the way we pay attention to what we are doing. Occasionally, it's about teaching people that maximum effort is sometimes wasting energy; that literally "attacking" the work is not always the best strategy.

As nervous system balance is restored, the key is then to learn strategies to sustain an easy flow from the inevitable spikes that occur (e.g. racing for the puck in a hockey game), to a state where more balance is required (e.g. opening focus to see all the players on the ice and figuring out what the next play could be.)

Developing an inner eye to what's going on in the nervous system takes practice. But once open, the potential for physical change is astounding. The body becomes better and better able to "feel" when things are going well, when it's on the edge and when it has literally "dis-integrated" into compensation and struggle. This kind of internal felt-sense

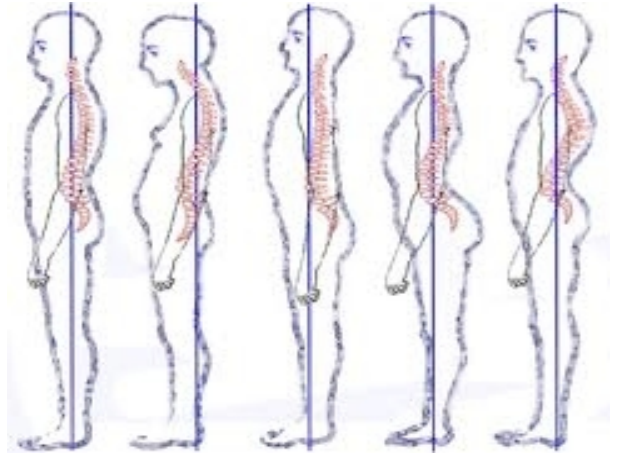


awareness is the best injury-prevention and performance tool I've ever encountered. Creating balance in the autonomic nervous system is not something you can learn at mock 10. It takes time, curiosity, attention, introspection and a commitment to change. The benefits though, are immense, and well worth the effort.

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Structure, Posture and Patterning

I positioned structure, posture and patterning toward the end of my Movement Manifesto not because they are the least important, but because they are all hugely influenced by each of the previous elements I've outlined, and by each other too. Once again, it's about connections!



We all have different shapes and sizes. Short legs, long arms. Long waist, flat feet.

Tight ligaments, and a narrow pelvis. Hypermobility joints and twists in the spine. The variations are endless. Some aspects of our physical bodies are genetic and won't be influenced by much. But you would be amazed at how much the way we move habitually has an effect on our postures and eventually on our structures.

We are literally shape-shifters! The incredible plasticity of the human body allows for significant shifts and compensations, giving us the ability to transform our tissues to accommodate stress or health. Imagine a movement you try out once. For whatever reason, that gesture works for you in some way; it feels good, it achieves a goal. You repeat that movement often enough, and it becomes a habitual motion. As the habit is repeated again and again (and similar muscle patterning is repeated), that habit starts to influence posture. And as that posture becomes more firmly entrenched in the body over time, it literally stiffens into structure.

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Our movement patterns are influenced by our desires, our observations and perceptions, our emotions, our habits, any coaching or training we receive, how active or inactive we are, injuries we've sustained and overcome, and those we may not have overcome. Our movement patterns will influence how we move through life, including how we train our bodies for fitness.

Any given exercise is only as good as the foundation it rests on. When posture and movement patterning are a mess - exercise protocols often go out the window without proper coaching as to how to access the appropriate structures.

Posture, rather than being a static thing, is part of a dynamic foundation. When that foundation is healthy, resilient and strong, good things happen. Knowing that; identifying postural tendencies and movement patterns becomes even more profoundly important for training. In the absence of new information, when load is added to the body, the body simply does MORE of what it already knows. If there are postural issues and/or movement pattern dysfunctions, then guess what; you train them into the body more deeply. I don't imagine that's the goal most people set out to achieve.

We can't have a conversation about structure, posture and movement patterning without talking about fascia. Fascia is a web-like connective tissue network that is imbued within and around all of our structures, providing support and creating a tensegrity between them. Fascia acts as a vehicle for communication and a mechanism for creating differentiated movement between our tissues. New science is revealing that fascia plays much more important role in our movement than we realized. Paying attention to the health of the fascia is gaining more and more widespread attention - and deservedly so! Move in as many different ways as you can - changing up range of motion, load, speed, and tension. And make sure you're drinking enough water to go with your movement!

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When an exercise program addresses the need for varied motion to support structure, posture, patterning and fascial health, it goes a long way toward developing a resilient kind of strength that the body can sustain over time. New ways of working the body are emerging to reflect the fact the fascial network needs our attention, not as another check on the “to-do” list, but as an integrated part of our movement training.

Expanding the notion of fitness beyond the strength of the muscles allows other systems in the body to connect to, support and even enhance movement. When we can take a holographic view of the body in motion, rather than a linear one, amazing relationships become clear. When we remember that every exercise will not be received in the same way by every body, and that protocols are only as good as the results they produce within us, we open the door to new possibilities for motion. And isn't that the whole point?

Do yourself a favour.

Look, really look, at yourself, your life, and your movement.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Does your fitness plan support your life?
- Does it lift you up, or stress you out?
- Can you find peace within it, or are you addicted to the extreme?
- Does it give you the chance to work at your maximum, while respecting any (for now) limitations?
- Do you have less pain, or more pain?
- Is your life improving in some way as a result?
- Most of all, can you find yourself reflected somewhere in your fitness program?

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Let Me Tell You A Story...

I recently had the opportunity to work with a female athlete who had suffered a ruptured lumbar disc. She is a healthy, active woman who also has a very physical job. As a competitive mountain biker, she was used to pushing her body to the limit on a regular basis; often training with men.



She was in her happy place taking multi-day back-country rides in very difficult terrain. The ruptured disc, however, had the potential to change all of that. She was terrified that her current condition was her new normal.

As a part of her rehab though, integrated with some traditional protocols, we worked at calming the sympathetic nervous system, re-orienting her approach to effort, creating new core support strategies and allowing for a new awareness of other systems in her body to emerge. She was learning to listen to her body in a completely different way.

After several months, she was able to complete what, immediately after her injury, had seemed like an impossible feat: another multi-day back-country ride with the guys! I'll never forget the joy in her voice when after her trip, she came to me and said "***I'm back!!***" As an added bonus, she had also noticed that even after a long day's ride, she had "*more in the tank*," than she was used to, and the other athletes with her noticed it as well! She says she's now aware of a deep sense of ease in her body that "*was never there before*."

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This athlete experienced some difficult challenges as she explored new ways of relating to and training her body. She was in unfamiliar territory and often got contrary messages from friends, colleagues and teammates. But she worked diligently and stayed committed to herself in the process. Her results speak for themselves. Where a year ago she was considering the very real possibility of never riding again, she can now look forward to riding into her dotage if that's what she wants to do.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The world of fitness is changing. Our perspectives are widening to include neuroscience and fascia, psychology and breath. It's about more than just muscle. Fluid function is the goal. More than anything, what is becoming clear is that we cannot ignore the individual in any program that hopes to achieve long-term health and



full movement potential. We have to connect to ourselves in our movement for best results.

If we expect real fitness from our movement programs, we have to stop expecting the quick fix. We have to unplug long enough to be able to hear what our bodies are trying to tell us. We have to connect to what we're doing, and find ways to keep that connection alive and bright. Junk movement doesn't do any more for us than junk food. Let's learn to do really well what we do often. Our structures and long term mobility demand it!

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Working holistically, with sensitivity, compassion, intensity and drive, creates a deep sense of well-being, and a fitter, smarter body! Fitness professionals have to lead the way. We have a responsibility, in my view, to create an environment where deep kinesthetic learning is possible. It's not a linear process! The pace of each client's progress will be different as each one encounters his/her own challenges to awareness, sensation, balance and strength. But I ask you... why not?

Let's all start listening to the body's wisdom a little more. Move well, move often, and have fun! Come on. Try it. You might just like it.

If you're ready to explore the possibilities of an integrated movement & Pilates program that is personalized to your needs, and designed to give you the tools you need to live your whole life to the fullest, connect with me. I'd love to be part of your support team.

With much love,

Susannah Steers

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