

The Rubenfeld Synergy Method® Addresses Mind, Body and Spirit

by Suzanne Forman

"Rubenfeld what?" I asked my friend. "Rubenfeld Synergy," he replied. I was talking to a friend about wanting to do more with my massage therapy practice. He was excitedly telling me about the body-mind training he had recently joined. "You'll learn how to be with your clients in ways that I don't think you could learn anywhere else," he said.

At the time this conversation took place, I had been in private practice as a massage therapist in Northampton, Massachusetts, for several years. I loved my work, in large part because I never knew what was going to happen in a session. For some reason, I had never attracted many clients who wanted to receive a massage passively, or who expected massage to quickly fix whatever symptoms they were experiencing. Instead, I attracted curious, introspective people who often made discoveries in sessions about ways that their physical experience reflected parts of their past or present emotional lives.

I remember a marathon runner and overextended professional who was sure that her foot problems were connected to her inability to stop running, literally and figuratively, long enough to let herself find some balance in her life. And a man whose injuries sustained in a car accident exactly duplicated injuries from a childhood trauma, and who, during a massage, remembered and re-experienced his long-buried childhood fear and vulnerability.

My massage therapy teachers had prepared me to expect these types of situations occasionally. And I knew from both massage school and my own experiences to deeply trust the body's wisdom when these situations did arise. But I didn't feel able to do more than just hold the space for these clients and encourage them to trust themselves. I began to feel that if my work was taking clients into deeper dimensions, I needed to be able to see them through to the other side. But where could I learn such a skill?

A Gestalt therapy training was helpful, but not designed for bodyworkers like me. The brief weekend workshops I was able to find in somato-emotional release left me feeling excited, but wanting much more. The Rubenfeld Synergy Method training, as my friend described it, sounded like the answer to my question. I attended an introductory workshop, and recognized that I had found my next teacher.

Tell me more

The Rubenfeld Synergy Method is the grandmother of bodymind therapies, founded by Ilana Rubenfeld over 35 years ago. (The term "bodymind" refers to the oneness of body and mind within a person.) The oldest therapy of its kind, it has always had a strong, quiet following, but is receiving greater recognition now that body-oriented therapy is coming more to the public's attention. Rubenfeld Synergy is a powerful joining of gentle touch and talk that helps clients make real changes in their lives by teaching them to know and trust the wisdom and wonder of their own bodyminds. Unlike some recently developed bodymind therapies, such as a team of a psychologist and bodyworker working together, each Rubenfeld Synergist is trained to work somatically and process emotions simultaneously. There are no known contraindications for the work, and sessions are conducted with the client fully clothed, making it appropriate for just about anyone.

Rubenfeld Synergy attracts a variety of clients. Many of them are like Tom, who saw Steve Forman in Northampton, Massachusetts, for two years. Tom says, "Rubenfeld Synergy was recommended to me by my father, who was working with a Rubenfeld Synergist in his home town. I was having some problems with anxiety, and had tried traditional psychotherapy before, but never any kind of bodywork. My father was so enthusiastic about the benefits he was getting from the combination of the talking and touching that I decided to give it a shot. Steve helped me get out of my head and into my body, so that I was in touch with my feelings in a real way. As I learned to pay attention to my physical symptoms and their accompanying emotions, my outlook on my anxiety totally changed. Instead of wanting it to go away, I learned to understand it as a signal to me, a teacher. I was surprised that what I had thought of as a 'bad' feeling was actually an asset. And I found that I have inner resources that I didn't even know about, like feelings of great affirmation and a sense of well-being that were there all along, but that I missed because I was so caught up in the anxiety. The touch of Rubenfeld Synergy made it easier for those openings to occur than if Steve and I had just talked.

Deborah Ramsden, is a Rubenfeld Synergist who sees a great variety of clients in her offices at both the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, and her private practice in Westchester County, New York. At Omega, Deborah often sees clients for only one or two sessions during their brief stays. She says, "The people who go to Omega tend to have tried many kinds of psychotherapy and bodywork. I can't tell you how often a client will say to me, 'Compared with all of the time I've spent in other therapies, I can't believe how much movement I experienced in this one session.'"

Other Rubenfeld Synergists, like Sandra Pruzansky and Joe Weldon, have specialized practices. Sandra's clientele in New Providence, New Jersey, consists mainly of older adults. She explains, "A lot of older adults have so many aches and pains that they eventually dissociate from their bodies, or come to think of their bodies as their enemy. Rubenfeld Synergy helps them gently develop their internal awareness again. As they get back in touch with their physical beings, of course they are also reconnecting with their whole selves since the body, mind and spirit are inseparable."

Joe Weldon is a Master Synergist and senior faculty member at the Rubenfeld Center in New York City who also maintains a private practice in the Philadelphia area. He has a lot of experience working with brain-injured clients and those with multiple sclerosis. "What I hear time and time again from my clients, whether they have a head injury, MS, or some other condition, is how seen and heard they feel in our session," Joe says. "These people are used to others defining them by their diagnosis, and then working with the corresponding treatment plan. Rubenfeld Synergy offers people a new way of seeing and hearing themselves, all of themselves. The way one client, who happens to be a physician with MS, describes it is that the kind of therapies she received before Rubenfeld Synergy felt superimposed on her, whereas Rubenfeld Synergy feels like it comes from within her. She says that somehow being seen more fully by me has helped her see and feel herself more fully, which she thinks is why she has made as much progress as she has."

And who does Rubenfeld Synergy attract as practitioners? A large portion, like myself, have a background in some type of somatic work: massage therapists, chiropractors, dancers, nurses and doctors, acupuncturists. Another large contingent is composed of those with a background in psychology. Then, there are always a few people with no previous professional training in either somatic or emotion work, but whose curiosity and personal experiences have inspired them to make a career change. In my training class, an artist, television cameraperson and executive secretary fell under this last heading.

Almost without exception, people who are interested in becoming Rubenfeld Synergists are already successful in their previously chosen fields.

As Frederick James, a chiropractor and Rubenfeld Synergist in New York City explains, "I was hearing a lot about bodymind integration therapies, and tried a number of them as a client. Rubenfeld Synergy was the first one that delivered what it promised. I was very impressed with the benefits I was receiving as a Rubenfeld Synergy client, and I began to imagine how wonderful it would be to offer my chiropractic clients this kind of work. My Rubenfeld Synergist was encouraging, and so I entered the training. It was the first and only training that enticed me enough to return to school since becoming a chiropractor in 1981."

Deborah Ramsden was an Alexander Technique teacher when she entered the program. "When I began teaching (Alexander Technique) lessons in 1987, I loved how wonderful the Alexander work was at enhancing people's awareness of old physiological holding patterns. But I couldn't address the life history that causes people to develop their patterns in the first place. Rubenfeld Synergy was the perfect training to teach me how to address the whole person."

The development of the method

In order to fully understand what Rubenfeld Synergy is, it helps to know how the method developed. Many of the wonderful, innovative therapies we use today grew out of their founders' need for personal healing, and Rubenfeld Synergy is no exception. Ilana Rubenfeld was an orchestral conductor when she injured her back in 1960. The first person who offered any real hope for recovery was an Alexander Technique teacher named Judith Liebowitz. Judith's gentle touch evoked a strong emotional response in Ilana as her body armor began to melt. Judith knew that and referred Ilana to someone else in order to process the emotions that were emerging, since the Alexander Technique does not deal with emotional responses. But by the time Ilana arrived for each psychotherapy appointment, the emotions she felt in her Alexander Technique lesson were a distant memory; she could talk about them but not experience them in the moment. She longed for a type of therapy that combined the touch and talk in a single practitioner's work. Since such an approach was not available to her, she set out to create it herself. Fortunately, Ilana recognized the importance of her

discovery, and decided to devote her life to developing this new paradigm. And the Rubenfeld Synergy Method was conceived.

Its gestation involved years of study and practice with many teachers. Her continued Alexander Technique lessons were crucial, and led to Ilana becoming an Alexander teacher herself. Around the same time, the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, was just beginning to offer a variety of "alternative" healing workshops, and Ilana began to spend quite a lot of time there, first as a student, then as a teacher. It was at Esalen that she met Fritz Perls, the co-founder of Gestalt therapy, and realized that she had found the philosophy and model for another crucial component of her work.

Fritz Perls was a brilliant, powerful therapist who was well-known for his very confrontational style. He loved to demonstrate dramatic breakthroughs in a single session. Laura Perls, also co-founder of Gestalt therapy and Ilana's teacher and colleague, had a different style that complemented her husband's. Laura would say, "Ah, yes, after the breakthrough, the ongoing integrative work begins." Fritz demonstrated Gestalt therapy by working with each individual in front of the rest of the group. The chair next to Fritz came to be called the "hot seat," available for whatever courageous soul wanted to work that day. A film entitled *The Birth of a Composer* was made during a session when Ilana was on the hot seat, working with a dream. Ilana can occasionally be talked into showing the film of this very special session to trainees and workshop participants.

As their professional relationship developed, Fritz often asked Ilana to sit on the other side of his client as he and the client talked. This was a wonderful opportunity for Ilana to continue researching and observing how the body responds to verbal conversation, and whether the body's story is congruent to what the person is saying. This continuing laboratory for Ilana and Fritz ended when Fritz died in 1970.

Not long afterward, Ilana met Moshe Feldenkrais, with whom she trained for many years. His exercises complemented the touch and psychotherapy of Rubenfeld Synergy. His work, the Feldenkrais Method, became the third major inspiration of Ilana's in her development of the Rubenfeld Synergy Method.

Ilana continued to refine her own style of working with clients by taking the best teachings of each of these masters and combining them to form something totally new, something much greater than the sum of these parts (hence the name "Synergy," first suggested to Ilana by Buckminster Fuller). Ilana found a way of guiding clients to major insights using humor, validation, empathy and endless support combined with very specific touches and movements. She also began to codify principles that ensure that clients will integrate what they learn into their lives for the long term. Over the years, these principles have been refined into 18 "Principles and Theoretical Foundations of the Rubenfeld Synergy Method"

Felice's session

The following description of a Rubenfeld Synergy session shows how some of the technique's principles are applied.

A client whom I'll call Felice contacted me because she was having chronic gastrointestinal problems that were a mystery to the physicians she had consulted. She was seeing me with the blessing of her internist to explore the bodymind connection of her symptoms.

After the first few sessions, Felice realized that her blocked digestive system suggested to her the symbolic question, "What did I consume in the past and not digest that is getting in the way of my being able to receive nourishment today?" The combination of the gentle touch and verbal explorations of Rubenfeld Synergy allowed the many answers to that question to flow. There was the story of having to care for her younger siblings without complaint at age eight during her mother's long illness. The time she walked several miles to a neighbor's house with an untreated broken arm in an attempt to avoid being shamed in her own home for letting her pain show. And the many times in her adult life when she had similarly "swallowed" her feelings and desires in an attempt to be more pleasing to others. As she recounted each of these body stories to me, Felice, experienced a noticeable difference in her bodymind, such as a relaxation in her abdomen, or looseness in her joints, or lightness of mood.

Felice's bodymind was releasing yet another one of these indigestible stories as I very gently held one of my hands on her sternum, the other under her upper thoracic spine. Her eyes were tightly shut, her breathing

labored, her back muscles taut against my hand. A change in her breathing pattern and in the quality of the tissue between my hands alerted me to ask, "What's happening?"

She said after a moment, "Your hand feels so heavy on my chest. Like a huge weight."

I began to feel more movement in her chest. Keeping one hand on her sternum, and cradling her tight neck with the other hand, I asked her, "What would you like to say to the weight?"

"Stop holding me back!" came instantly and forcefully. I encouraged her to say it a few more times to let the feeling increase, and began to feel her neck softening, her chest moving more freely.

Reflecting on her history, I knew to ask, "Who else do you want to say that to, Felice?"

She took several huge gulps of air before replying, "All of them! All of it. I want to say that to my whole past! Go away! I want my life back! No, I demand my life back! I removed my hands so that I could encourage the flow of energy to release from her belly and chest. Felice's face flushed and her eyes flew open as she turned to me and repeated, "I demand my life back!"

She spent the rest of that session experimenting with this key phrase and feeling her power as never before. While Felice still had a lot of work ahead of her, this moment was the first time she had ever felt strong enough to realize that it was possible to break out of the prison of her past. She believed that as she continued to feel the meaning and memories attached to her gastrointestinal symptoms, she would find relief from those symptoms and be able to take in actual and symbolic nourishment once again.

The head bone's connected to a lot more than the neck bone
What is actually happening during a Rubenfeld Synergy session that encourages such powerful bodymind changes to take place? That question has been the topic of many lively dinner conversations within the Rubenfeld Synergy community, with each discussion generating more answers than the dinner before. Tiffany Field, Ph.D., Candace Pert, Ph.D., Andrew Weil, M.D., and other researchers and scientists have documented the therapeutic effects of touch in general on self-healing, and there is room for much more research to be done.

Ilana Rubenfeld explains, "let's look at an example of a single touch that we often use in Rubenfeld Synergy sessions: gently holding the client's head in our palms, with our fingertips on the occipital ridge. While we cradle the head with the attitude of listening to the whole person, we are contacting a number of physiological systems with this one touch, including the craniosacral system, the musculoskeletal and blood circulatory systems, the respiratory system, the central nervous system, and on and on.

"We also observe with a sense of mystery," Ilana continues, "that the Rubenfeld Synergy Method's simultaneous use of touch and talk accesses the emotional part of us as well, which is inseparable from our physiology. Candace Pert, who calls this phenomenon 'the emotional molecule,' remarked to me after receiving a session 10 years ago that my work and her research are based on the same underlying principle: the body has emotions."

Our clients give us feedback that the benefits are real, and a number of soon-to-be-published studies on Rubenfeld Synergy support clients' experiences. These pilot studies have examined the effects of Rubenfeld Synergy on various issues, including self-esteem, body image, eating disorders, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, migraine and chronic headaches, fibromyalgia, diabetes, stuttering, spinal cord tension, creativity and self-expression.

Susan Maxwell Olvey of Maryville, Tennessee, recently completed some research on the effect of Rubenfeld Synergy on people diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Susan gave six Rubenfeld Synergy sessions to a small sample of people, and tested them before the first session and after the sixth using a standard psychological test. Every participant made positive, measurable gains. Especially intriguing and exciting to Susan was the fact that the sessions she did with the study participants were not specifically focused on their anxiety disorders. "I offered regular Rubenfeld Synergy sessions, allowing the content to be whatever was happening in the moment for each client, just as I normally do," Maxwell said. "What the results mean to

me is that there is an inherent healing quality in Rubenfeld Synergy even when it's not focused on a specific diagnosis."

Massage and Rubenfeld Synergy

A typical question asked by a massage therapist upon entering the training is, "How can this work be used in conjunction with my massage practice?" With care and attention, it is possible for a massage therapist also to practice Rubenfeld Synergy. But it is important to keep in mind that these two types of therapies are different in some important ways.

Perhaps most significant is the fact that Rubenfeld Synergy allows the client to examine underlying emotional causes of tension, injury or imbalance. Thus, the Rubenfeld Synergist needs to have much more training in verbal therapeutic skills than does a massage therapist, and needs to use touch that specifically supports the client's emotional exploration. Another difference is that a Rubenfeld Synergy client remains fully clothed, while a massage therapy client does not.

Massage therapists who are interested in Rubenfeld Synergy have several options, as Marge Nocton-Barr, a massage therapist and Rubenfeld Synergist in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, discovered through her senior research project. She polled all massage therapists who had become Rubenfeld Synergists about how they integrate the two practices. Some, including me, choose to stop seeing massage clients altogether and focus only on Rubenfeld Synergy. Others, like Marge, find that it works best for them to see some clients for massage and others for Rubenfeld Synergy, essentially running two separate practices.

Rubenfeld Center faculty teach, and survey respondents agree, that it is not appropriate for anyone to see a client for both Rubenfeld Synergy and massage, either within one session or during a series of sessions over time, unless there is reason to make a special exception. This contract is necessary because it keeps the work focused and the space safe for both client and Rubenfeld Synergist. A massage client need not worry that she or he will be asked to examine emotions during a session. Similarly, a Rubenfeld Synergist client who suddenly has the urge to lay back and receive a massage rather than have a Rubenfeld Synergy session knows that such desire will be important grist for the mill. Did the previous session bring up something uncomfortable that the client does not want to revisit? What else is happening in the client's life?

Even if a massage therapist decides not to practice Rubenfeld Synergy after achieving certification to do so, the therapist will receive many benefits from the training, including improved somatic sensitivity, communication skills and self-care. A story from Marge's massage practice is an example of how her touch changed. Marge had a regular massage client, whom I'll call Charles, who had very sensitive feet. No matter how lightly Marge massaged his feet, Charles pulled back from the touch. When Marge was midway through the Rubenfeld Synergy training, she realized that Charles was no longer reacting that way. Marge muses, "I feel the change was due to my deepening skill of listening to my own body and to Charles in such a way that I knew what parts of him wanted to be touched." She had developed a different kind of sensitivity, which both she and her client noticed.

Katherine Dever, who is in the process of closing her Los Gatos, California, massage practice to focus only on Rubenfeld Synergy, appreciates the improvement in her observation and verbal skills as well.

"Those skills have become much more finely tuned," Dever says. "I'm much clearer about what I see happening in a session and how I communicate about it. For example, let's say a massage client shows up 15 minutes late to several sessions in a row. I would handle it by doing two things. First, I would be clear with the client that the session would still end on time, meaning she would have a 45 instead of a 60-minute massage. Second, I would ask if there was something that she didn't like about what was happening in the session, keeping the discussion focused on the physical experience of the massage. I might wonder about any issues of transference or resistance that are affecting her tardiness, but I would only bring those questions into the discussion with a Rubenfeld Synergy client, not with a massage client.

Any massage therapist going through the Rubenfeld Synergy training can expect to learn a tremendous amount about self-care that will support his or her practice as well. Justin Salvio, a Rubenfeld Synergist in Windsor, Connecticut, teaches workshops on self-care because he was so impressed with what a difference it makes in anyone's life, no matter what his or her occupation.

"Through Rubenfeld Synergy, I learned that self-care is not just about standing in the right way during a session, or developing my physical strength so that I'm more comfortable when working, though both of these are important," Salvio explains.

"The Rubenfeld Synergy sense of self-care is really about honing my self-awareness so that I know what my intention is in any given moment of a session. It's a way of checking with myself: 'Am I able to be a clear witness for this client right now, or am I here with some of my own baggage of wanting to be loved and valued?' or whatever (the) psychological patterns may be," he continues. "If I do find something getting in the way of my ability to be truly present, I now know how to bracket that to take care of it later in my own time, when it's appropriate. I've noticed over time that as I get clearer, clients seem to be able to do their own work more easily without being concerned about meeting my needs."

Dever adds some welcome information for any massage therapist: "After I learned Rubenfeld Synergy, I realized I don't have to work so hard at massage! I begin each massage session with a few simple somatic contacts on the client's hips, shoulders and neck, without the accompanying verbal or emotional component of Rubenfeld Synergy. That way, I don't have to fight through as much tight tissue when I begin the massage, and the client goes into a deeper state much earlier in the session."

Rubenfeld Synergists have rewarding professional relationships with massage therapists. As Deb Elkin, Rubenfeld Synergist and a former massage therapist in the Atlanta area says, "I trust and value what massage offers my clients. I had one client with deeply-held tension throughout her body. She wanted to let it go, but really wasn't ready to look at the emotional components to these holding patterns. I respected that, and referred her to a massage therapist to see if he could help. After six months ... she felt ready to work with both of us. Now, her body is finally softening and she's releasing some very old patterns around her performance needs and her femininity.

Training to become a Rubenfeld Synergist

Ilana Rubenfeld offered the first professional training in the Rubenfeld Synergy Method in 1977. Judy Swallow, a student in that group and Master Synergist in New Paltz, New York, remembers it well. "Ilana played many roles in the Rubenfeld Synergy production: administrator, trainer, supervisor, and personal Rubenfeld Synergist to each trainee," Swallow says. "She rented a lovely house on Long Island where we formed a community and worked together very intensively. It was a wonderful, intimate time of exploration for all of us. I think we were all aware that we were part of something very special."

Now in its 20th year, the training retains its personality of intimacy, exploration, excitement and community. Ilana makes good use of her orchestral training to conduct the many elements that contribute to the sacred quality of the Rubenfeld Synergy learning environment. Because she is aware of the many negative experiences people have had in traditional academic settings that hinder their ability to learn, she takes special care to help trainees feel supported and safe. She also knows that in order to be an effective Rubenfeld Synergist one must be willing to do serious self-exploration of one's own bodymind.

As a beginning trainee, I was very aware of this expectation and felt both anxious and excited. I remember introducing myself to the group that first evening, knowing that these were the people who were going to get to know me in a very special way, and me them. I was right. We were together in close quarters over the course of several years, during which we learned to touch each other, and to be with each others' fears, weaknesses and ignorance as well as beauty, strength and courage. We shared many moments of transcendence and hilarity. I made some lifelong friends and feel part of the very special, worldwide Rubenfeld Synergy community.

While the feeling of the training has remained the same since its inception, the structure has changed. The trainees in each four-year-long class gather at the Rubenfeld Center in either Greenwich Village or a residential country setting three times a year for seven intensive days of training each time. Other training components, including three weekend regional gatherings a year and a number of special projects, bring the total number of training hours to 1,600. While Ilana herself is still very present as the primary teacher during these trainings, many faculty and staff members have been added to contribute their creativity and ensure that the trainee/teacher ratio is kept to six to one.

Major daily training activities include Rubenfeld Bodymind Exercises; learning and practicing somatic moves; lecture and discussion on a specific aspect of the work, such as voice tonality, self-care or a psychological

principle; and witnessing and discussing a full Rubenfeld Synergy session with Ilana and a volunteer trainee. All trainees receive ongoing supervision and are required to see "practice clients," gratis and under supervision. A highlight of the training is each trainee's project for certification, a research project about some aspect of the work. Currently there are about 400 people certified in the Rubenfeld Synergy Method. Ilana says, "Remember the old joke where one fellow asks another, 'How do you get to Carnegie Hall?' and gets the answer, 'Practice, practice, practice'? If you were to ask me, 'How do you do Rubenfeld Synergy?' I'd say, "Supervision, supervision, supervision." In fact, as Rubenfeld Synergist Vicki Mechner of New York City and Mt. Kisco, New York, describes, supervision is a backbone of a Rubenfeld Synergist's practice.

"Supervision benefits me personally, as well as my clients," she says. "It keeps me growing personally, partly by helping me look at what pieces of my own history are being triggered by clients. As I take care of my own issues in supervision, I notice myself becoming more fully present, both in sessions with clients and in my relationships with friends and family members."

Looking to the future

As the Rubenfeld Synergy Method's healing qualities become more globally recognized, it is exciting to think about what will come next in the unfolding of this work, Ilana Rubenfeld comments, "At the closure of each session, I am moved by the universal themes that emerge. At its best, the relationship of trust created between client and Rubenfeld Synergist elevates our spirits and breaks through barriers that otherwise seem impenetrable.

"We need to be willing to go further in our practice than we have gone before. I would like to see us "go out on a limbic' and address our emotional nature. The more integrated and integrative we are as healers, the more powerfully we can serve as the agents of positive change in this fragmented world.

"As we complete the 20th century, we are headed toward integration of psychotherapy and somatic education. It is time to move this energy, this flow toward integration. It is time to usher in the 21st century of integration."

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