

An Interview With Julie Peale of Body Balance and Hellerwork and Structural Medicine

Interview by Bill Zirinsky

Photography by Tobi Hollander



Julie Peale, age 38, owns Body Balance of Ann Arbor, LLC, where she practices a combination of Hellerwork and structural medicine in one-on-one sessions with clients. Initially on a path to become a physical therapist, Julie attained a degree in biology from Central Michigan University, but her desire to help people on a more holistic level pushed her to explore other therapy modalities. Julie lives in Ypsilanti

Township with her husband, five-year-old daughter, and 18-month-old son.

Bill Zirinsky: *Where were you raised, Julie? Tell us a bit about your childhood.*

Julie Peale: I grew up in the small town of Coloma, Michigan. It is near Benton Harbor and St. Joseph. Being very near Lake Michigan, I enjoyed the beach and camping in the state parks with my family and friends. The lake is something I miss greatly since moving to Ann Arbor. I didn't realize how much of a constant and calming presence it was in my life.

Bill Zirinsky: *At what age, and how, did you become interested in helping and healing people?*

Julie Peale: I remember as a young teenager I talked about wanting to go into the health profession, but I didn't know in what way. My father encouraged me to volunteer at the hospital. I participated in a variety of areas, but was particularly interested in the physical therapy department.

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Bill Zirinsky: *You mentioned to me that your mom believed in herbal supplements, and took you and your sister to an herbalist. And then you studied with a botanist in college. What influence did that botanist have on you?*

Julie Peale: My final two years of college I worked as an assistant for a botany professor. We did a lot of field research and data collection, and I developed an interest in plants and nature. Also, being a professor of medicinal herbs, he encouraged me to explore the many therapeutic benefits available to us in nature.

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BZ: *Where did you go to college, and what did you study to become?*

Julie: I graduated from Central Michigan University with a degree in biology/pre-physical therapy. It was during my last year of school that I started to question my path to becoming a physical therapist and wondered if I could better serve my passion by using nature's resources to help heal and renew people's lives. In addition to my developing interest in medicinal herbs, I became interested in homeopathy. I decided to take some time after college to redirect my goals by learning about other types of holistic

therapies.

BZ: *Did you become a physical therapist? Did you practice as one?*

Julie: I did not become a physical therapist. It had become increasingly clear to me as I was preparing for the graduate program in physical therapy that while I was drawn to working with individuals who were experiencing some sort of pain in their bodies, I felt the environment of many physical therapy clinics was not well suited for the kind of work I wanted to do. I wanted to have more one-on-one time with the individuals and to work with them in a smaller, more private setting.

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BZ: *Julie, you’ve told me that structural medicine and physical therapy is the “magic combination” for you, in working with people. Tell us why?*

Julie: Structural medicine is a unique combination of the holistic approach of Hellerwork with some of the technical tools from the physical therapy world. This allows me to treat clients with specific symptoms or problems in their body. So yes, structural medicine is a “magic combination” for me because it allows me to practice the type of holistic physical therapy that I was drawn to early on in my life.

BZ: *Structural medicine’s origins are in Hellerwork, and Hellerwork’s origins are in Rolfing. How did*

Hellerwork depart from Rolfing? And how has structural medicine built on Hellerwork? Can you explain and trace this lineage succinctly for our readers?

Julie: Joseph Heller, the founder of Hellerwork, was a Rolfer for many years and worked as an instructor for Ida Rolf. He began to notice that many of his clients would return with the same postural patterns and pain, so he added in the elements of movement education and voice dialogue to help the client have a multifaceted experience. Ida Rolf did not want to teach those elements in her program. She felt that her practitioners could add them to their work outside of the Rolfing certification. Joseph Heller decided to start his own institute to teach the Hellerwork method, which includes the structural deep tissue bodywork similar to Rolfing, movement education to teach the client about their movement habits, and voice dialogue to discuss lifestyle habits and emotional mindsets that could be contributing to the client's posture. The latter two help to bring awareness to the client so he or she can make changes to reinforce the structural and postural changes achieved through the bodywork. Structural medicine took the holistic approach of Hellerwork and integrated some treatment and diagnostic tools to better equip the practitioner to work with specific conditions or symptoms that the client may be experiencing.

BZ: Anne Carbone has been doing Hellerwork in the region for a long time. How did you come across her, and what influence did she have on you?

Julie: It was only a few years after graduation from college, and I was pondering what direction of alternative or complementary therapies I wanted to become trained in. I was still interested in the physical therapy field, but was considering whether massage or possibly Rolfing would allow me to work with clients in the way that I was drawn to. My brother had been working with Anne Carbone to help resolve a shoulder injury. He encouraged me to see Anne for some of my own issues stemming from a car accident that I had been in during my teens.

The first session with Anne was very meaningful because, for the first time, I felt that someone had really seen me as a whole person. She saw how each pain I was feeling was related to my whole being, rather than compartmentalizing everything. My experience working with her was so positive for my own wellness and healing that I looked into what it would take for me to become a Hellerwork practitioner myself.

BZ: Tell us about Donna Bajelis and how she has been integral to your path? You told me that structural medicine gives treatment tools and assessment tools to the Hellerwork practitioner. How and why?

Julie: Donna Bajelis was the primary instructor of the Hellerwork training I participated in. Anne Carbone had told me that she would be a good fit for me to study under because she was a practicing physical therapist who was also a Hellerwork practitioner and had been teaching for the Hellerwork organization for over 10 years. Donna was innovative in bringing in many of the tools from the physical therapy world to the holistic approach of Hellerwork. With Joseph Heller as her close mentor and friend, she got the support to

do what he himself had done with the Rolf Institute. She decided to branch out from Hellerwork and start her own institute teaching the modality of structural medicine. I feel fortunate to have been a part of her training because I had the roots of Hellerwork blended with the treatment and assessment tools from her physical therapy background. Donna continues to be a mentor for me both professionally and personally. Since my graduation from the program 10 years ago, I continue to stay involved with her institute and spend time working with her in her Seattle office.

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***BZ:** You have told me that you “wanted the complicated issues that were failed by medicine.” Please amplify on that.*

Julie: Coming from my own experience of being “failed” by medicine, I wanted to be a help to others in similar experiences. The tools of structural medicine give me the confidence and skills to assess the symptoms a client is experiencing. My goal is to find the source or combination of imbalances that is causing the pain. This approach of looking at the whole body as one functioning unit is a strength of Hellerwork and structural medicine.

***BZ:** To what degree is your approach customized to each individual who comes to see you?*

Julie: There is a traditional Hellerwork series that is about 12 to 15 sessions that works through the entire body in a systematic way. It is a brilliant design to transform a person’s structure, but I have found that many of my clients are dealing with too much pain on a daily basis to benefit from the traditional series. Based on their symptoms, posture, and results of the range of motion testing I do, I customize a session to get to the root cause of their pain. Once the client experiences the possibility for less pain in their body, then we may decide to work through the more systematic approach of the Hellerwork series.

***BZ:** Can you make a stab at describing a typical session? Are your clients lying down, sitting up, or standing, or what?*

Julie: A session usually lasts 90 minutes. I do a postural assessment and some range of motion testing to determine what is the best way to proceed, but most of the time is spent doing the hands on deep tissue bodywork. Typically, the client is lying down on the table, but there are times when I may do some of the treatment with them sitting or even standing. I use pillows and blankets to prop them in a position where they feel the most comfort and ease to allow the bodywork to be most effective.

BZ: How is your work different from massage?

Julie: While the treatment can be relaxing, this is not the primary goal of the session. The intention is to make long-term structural changes that can be felt in the body. Rather than a general head to toe treatment, each session works in a specific area of the body that is holding tension or is responsible for pulling alignment out of place. This is not a passive experience for the client. It is an interactive process where the client may be propped in certain positions, asked to concentrate on breathing deeply, and asked to periodically move certain muscles to facilitate the release necessary to achieve the structural change.

BZ: Can you share some anecdotes of your working with specific issues.

Julie: I have worked with individuals with issues ranging from chronic back pain to acute disc problems who have found relief. Runners have reported being able to train harder and faster for competitions without pain. This work has been helpful for individuals with hip and knee replacements to help restore flexibility and recovery. In other scenarios, this can help put off the need for surgery and, in some cases, clients have not needed to have surgery at all. For some individuals, the work is more emotional in nature. The reduction of stress and tension in their body opens up a conversation about possible changes to make in their personal life to improve their overall well-being.

I had a memorable experience with a client who came to me with severe sciatica and muscle spasms in his hip. He was to the point of being in constant pain and was no longer able to enjoy his work or hobbies of fishing and motorcycle riding. After two sessions with me, he was 90 percent pain-free and able to enjoy his daily responsibilities and hobbies again. To be able to improve someone's quality of life to that degree was particularly rewarding and reinforced my commitment to continuing this work.

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BZ: You like to help your clients bring awareness to how they feel “before and after.” Please expand on that.

Julie: I always like to have the client do some sort of movement before we begin the bodywork, whether it be walking around the room, sitting or standing with awareness of their posture. Throughout the session and at the end, I like to have them feel how things may be different. I want to bring awareness to how the

structural changes that have occurred during the session will change the way they move in their bodies. I find this helps them retain the changes even if it is from the memory of how they felt “before.”

***BZ:** What other modalities have you worked with, and are you working with?*

Julie: I have integrated the use of essential oils into my practice. I have found some oils to be beneficial in releasing muscular tension and relieving inflammation. I have also enjoyed teaching workshops about the everyday use of essential oils in our life. I am currently working on a side project of developing a line of therapeutic creams and sprays made with essential oils as the active ingredients.

***BZ:** Please tell us a bit about your family.*

Julie: I have been married to a supportive and wonderful husband for 15 years. We have two delightful children, a 5-year-old daughter and 18-month-old son. We live in Ypsilanti Township with our two yellow labs and a petite and affectionate kitty. In the summers, we enjoy gardening, camping, bonfires, and being outdoors. This fall we are making a big shift as a family as our daughter starts kindergarten.

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