ACCESSING THE POWER OF THE GROUND

By Laura Servid, OTR/L
Certified Aston® Patterning Practitioner

ASTON-® PATTERNING

There was a time when it seemed that what was really needed in my occupational therapy world was a course in “self-defense against gravity.” Gravity kept clients from being able to rise easily from chairs. It made it so difficult to lift a weak arm or leg. For those clients with low back pain, lifting objects against gravity was a challenge; at best, it was out of the question. Just sitting up straight in a chair seemed to be hard work. And gravity pulsed on the tissues and compressed the joints of the average aging body, seemingly accelerating the aging process. If we could just find a way to overcome this compressive force, all would be well.

When I mentioned the idea to Judith Aston back in 1989, her response took me completely by surprise. To speak of “self-defense against gravity,” she said, sounded like gravity was the enemy. She had always considered gravity a friend. My mind was boggled. This was a 180-degree turn-about from my thinking. How could this pervasive, compressive force be considered a friend?

The extent to which gravity can be a friend, and a very powerful one, is incredible. Its attraction between two masses — our bodies and the ground — is the gravitational force with which we are most familiar. The equal and opposite action, Newton’s third law, the “other side” of gravity, is ground reaction force (GRF). This force is less familiar, yet just as significant. Together, these create a wave of energy that can enhance our movement on the earth, making any function simultaneously less difficult and gentler on our bodies. It is an amazing power. Aston® Patterning teaches us how to access this power and use it easily in our everyday function.

Aston® Patterning combines alignment and movement precisely and accurately, offering anybody greater ease of function. It begins with a systematic way to see the body and its segments in relation to each other and the ground. This pattern of vision reveals the cause of many of the chronic aches and pains with which we are confronted as therapists. Acting as a conduit for the energies of gravity are GRF, the body requires a flow of movement through the segments, joints and tissues to sustain its dynamic state. In places where this flow is inter-
ruptured by a change in angle, force vectors, or tension counterbalancing one another, there is a disruption of the movement. This disruption often means tension, lack of movement, or a kind of stillness. One of the truisms of Aston-Patterning is that, where stillness meets motion, there is a stress point. These stress points are often places of pain or discomfort. Once we learn to see the body in its stationary balance and in motion with an eye toward the shifts in its alignment and dimension, we begin to understand where the force of gravity necessitates tension to keep the upright posture, and where the ground force is blocked from effectively pushing up through its structure to unweight it.

Another component of Aston-Patterning is the unraveling of unnecessary tensions in an individua-

vidually specific sequence so that the body is allowed to be its best three-dimensional shape. The Aston courses teach massage and myofascial release in a form that is unique to this work. Practitioners learn to use gravity and GRF, through their own bodies to make their work more effective. Once in the flow of the earth’s energies, the client’s body is felt more clearly, revealing tissue grain and direction. (Refer to illustrations of contrasting body work styles.) The careful combination of body usage and accurate touch produce a bodywork that is comfortable both for the client and practitioner, with unbelievable effectiveness in its subtlety. Over and over, clients comment that they can’t believe that so little force can make so much change.

The optimal three-dimensional shape uncovered with the release of tension patterns is characterized by several factors. First, the parts are arranged so that segments are continued on next page.
aligned, well. This means the joint surfaces contact each other fully creating an open aperture for movement to occur.

push off the ground. Because of gravity's equal and opposite reaction, pushing into the ground with accurate weight bearing through the joint produces an upward energy that lifts the body through space with minimal effort. (Refer to illustration of force direction.) It's as if we can rebound and bounce up. At the top of this 'up,' there is a moment of suspension, just a split second of unweight, which allows one to feel an instant of freedom and expansion prior to yielding to gravity and returning for the next push. This is the 'hang time' we see in athletic performance at the peak of a jump. This lift, this up, this energizing way of accessing ground force and experiencing the suspension is one of the things that makes Aston-Patherning so unique and such a gift to share with clients.

The advantages of this type of movement are fairly extensive. From the muscle spindle to the Golgi tendon organs, proprioceptive input that monitors our movement is depen
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and control of her legs than she has ever had in her life. Getting in touch with the ground has allowed both neurological and musculoskeletal gains, not only greatly increasing her function, but offering an unexpected hopefulness to her life.

Twenty-one years in the OT field has allowed me the opportunity to work with a wide range of clientele and problems. We are always working together to improve function and make their daily living experiences as accessible and fulfilling as possible. Without a doubt, Aston-Patterning has given me the best array of tools to help empower people in their day-to-day function, regardless of what it is they want to do. Its fundamental concepts allow an extraordinary scope of application to improve functional performance on all levels. In my experience, the training surpasses any other method in its comprehensive understanding of each person as a whole entity of body, mind, and life expression. The bodywork and movement education combine to create the true gift, accessing the power of the ground that is there for all of us, all the time.

Laura Servid, OTR/L, has worked as an occupational therapist in inpatient and outpatient hospital settings. She has extensive experience in stroke rehab and hand therapy. She developed a functional movement training program for back pain clients, and more recently is co-teaching a treatment program for repetitive strain injuries. She began taking classes in Aston-Patterning in 1989 and completed the certification program in January 1995. She has done consulting work in office ergonomics and in industry with product development. Currently, she has a private practice using the Aston work.

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Your Swing

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and NovaCare clinical operations director, who is responsible for bringing BACKtoGOLF to Columbus, Ohio. Dipman also organizes the certification and training sessions for therapists interested in being part of the BACKtoGOLF program.

Some of the highlights of the clinic include: a biomechanical golf evaluation; treatment, prevention and rehabilitation program management; golf-specific exercises; golf swing analysis; and golf swing enhancement with instruction and coaching.

BACKtoGOLF clinics use The Coach®, a David Leadbetter product, to achieve a "stabilized spine golf swing." The Coach helps strengthen golf-specific muscles. "We can tell which tissues or muscles are restricting [clients] in their golf swing or if they are actually doing something biomechanically wrong," Dipman said. "Golf can be pretty stressful to the back if you don't have the right type of swing."

Following one to two treatment sessions with a physical therapist and a PGA/LPGA professional, a golfer can anticipate a significant change, depending on his or her swing and the condition of the golfer.

The clinics are individualized. "It's a hands-on approach," Dipman said. "We don't just give [clients] exercises...to do at home or in a clinic. If we pick up that they have tightness or restriction, we do joint mobilization and soft tissue work to speed up getting flexibility, which gives them the ability to really turn and have more power."

There are 60 BACKtoGOLF clinics nationwide that treat 75 to 100 patients annually. "It's grown across the country," Dipman said.

Physical therapists interested in certification and training sessions can call BACKtoGOLF toll-free at 888-228-6453.