

This physical therapist pulls, slaps and prods to relieve patients' chronic pain

By [Danielle Douglas-Gabriel](#) November 3

It was only the second day of the Atlanta regional trials for the 2015 CrossFit Games, but Teresa Luz, 36, feared it would be her last in the competition.

While performing a 350-pound partner dead lift with a teammate from [12 Labours CrossFit](#) in Columbia, Md., Luz pulled a ligament in her lower back, which left her in excruciating pain. But if she quit, her team would have to withdraw from the May competition because the rules barred substitutes.

“I thought it was over for us. I thought it was over for me, for the team,” recalls Luz, who still tears up when she talks about it. “When we left the competition that day, I had to lie on my stomach in the back seat of the car, and the whole drive I kept thinking I just crushed our chances.”

Her teammate Jimmy Violand, a licensed physical therapist, called his boss, Andrew Bloch, back in Rockville. With Bloch's guidance, Violand applied pressure at various points on Luz's body, eliciting reflexes that ultimately alleviated her pain.

With the aid of a series of treatments throughout the competition, Luz pushed through seven events to qualify for the final games. “It was a miraculous ending to a very emotional roller coaster of a weekend,” said Luz, a nurse in Ellicott City.

At first glance, Bloch's treatment — which he calls Reflexive Pattern Therapy, or RPT — looks more like a Three Stooges skit than therapy, with lots of pulling, slapping and prodding. But the unconventional method relieves pain in minutes. At least it did for me.

With a little convincing on his part, I let Bloch, owner of [Advanced Wellness Systems](#), give me a demonstration to ease the nagging pain in my lower back.

Moving up from my feet, he delivered a quick jab to my calves, tugged at my bent legs and poked from side to side, identifying all of my aches. After several minutes, my back pain disappeared, at least for the next few hours.

“It is not a cure,” Bloch points out. “Patients have to do work to get better, but RPT is a good starting point on that journey.”

Bloch’s technique combines aspects of traditional physical therapy and acupuncture, minus the needles, to “reset the involuntary nervous system,” he said. Bloch, who has more than 15 years of training in traditional and alternative medicine, says the body develops involuntary pain responses that can be changed.

While studying for his master’s degree in physical therapy, Bloch remembers, a professor showed him pressure points that could alleviate help muscle cramps. It wasn’t a lesson that was included in any of his textbooks, but it opened up a world of possibilities for pain management.

“Traditional study didn’t answer all of the questions I had, so I turned to acupuncture,” Bloch says. “It took me a while to understand how to blend the best of both fields, but they work well together.”

At Advanced Wellness, an initial evaluation will run you \$175. All additional sessions cost \$80 and are covered by insurance. Bloch and his team treat from 175 to 250 people a week using the reflexive technique, which he designed for patients with chronic pain.

The Institute of Medicine estimates that there are more than 100 million people suffering from chronic pain, costing about \$600 billion a year in medical treatment and lost productivity. Scientists at the National Institutes of Health are [advocating](#) greater use of physical therapy, instead of drugs, to manage the pain.

“It makes sense for people to look for noninvasive, non-pharmaceutical therapies, and the breadth of practice within physical therapy can be broad,” said Eric Robertson, a clinical assistant professor of physical therapy at the University of Texas at El Paso. “That said, there are components that always need to be there regardless of the tool the provider chooses — a history of practice, examination — and those should be tailored to create an individualized treatment.”

Reflexive therapy is not meant to be a stand-alone treatment but rather one that works in concert with other therapies for a faster recovery, without reliance of drugs.

“If you can get rid of the pain, then you can do all of the strengthening exercises more effectively,” Bloch says.

When Luz returned from the Atlanta regionals, she underwent a series of weekly treatments involving the reflexive technique, meditation, stretching and gradual weightlifting. A visit to an orthopedic spine surgeon revealed that she had a bulging disk that would require intensive physical therapy instead of surgery.

She had just six weeks until the national CrossFit Games, where she would have to execute the same dead lift that caused the injury, but with an additional 100 pounds of weight. Bloch and his team gradually moved Luz from exercises using her body weight to lifting weights off the floor.

“That was the real test for me,” Luz said. “If I could pick things up off the floor, put them back down and do that over and over again like I would have to do in competition, then I’d know whether I was ready. I was so nervous.”

By the time the national games came around in July, Luz was back to lifting 95 percent of the weight she had been able to handle before the injury. In the end, her team finished sixth in [the world championship in Carson, Calif.](#)

“Our goal was top 10, so to finish sixth in the world we were just ecstatic,” said Luz, who still visits Bloch for routine checkups. “It was a storybook ending to the whole experience.”