

An overview of the *Feldenkrais Method*[®]

by Ralph Strauch

What is the *Feldenkrais Method*?

The *Feldenkrais Method* is a way of learning — learning to move more freely and easily, to carry less stress in your body, to stop doing the things that cause you pain. It is not the verbal/intellectual learning you were used to in school. It is learning through, and with, your body — learning that you knew as a child but lost touch with growing up. Through gentle movement and directed attention, it enhances your self-awareness to put you back in touch with yourself, with the fluid, easy movement that is your birthright. We call this kind of learning *somatic education*.

Why should you be interested in *learning*, you might ask, if you're suffering from back pain, the aftereffects of a stroke, or repetitive stress injury? Conditions like this are usually thought of as *physical conditions*, requiring *physical treatment*. But that way of thinking is incomplete and disempowering. It is *incomplete* because it overlooks the role that your subconscious responses play in the pain and limitation you experience. It is *disempowering* because it disregards your power to change those responses.

Pain and limitation come from two types of sources — underlying physical conditions, and the subconscious choices you make in organizing your body and your movements. A stiff back, for example, may result from a combination of inflamed muscles (a physical condition) and a subconscious tendency to hold your back tight and resist movement. This tightness may be partly a response to the inflamed muscles, and partly a habit developed over a lifetime (subconscious choices). It prevents your back from participating in your movement, thus increasing the stresses your movement impose on your back. Medical treatment addresses the physical conditions and neglects the subconscious choices, while the *Feldenkrais Method* helps you to change those choices.

The *Method* is taught in two formats — group classes and workshops in *Awareness Through Movement*, and individual lessons in *Functional Integration*.

In *Awareness Through Movement* classes the practitioner guides you through a sequence of

gentle non-strenuous movements. Attentive repetition helps you to discover how to move more comfortably and efficiently. Students often experience immediate improvements in posture, lightness of movement, and freedom from chronic discomforts.

In a *Functional Integration* lesson you typically lie on a low, padded table wearing loose, comfortable clothing. The practitioner uses gentle touch to explore your habitual patterns of organization and movement, and to suggest easier and more functional ways of being. Each lesson is adapted to your specific needs; there is no set sequence or number of lessons.

Though they appear quite different, *Awareness Through Movement* and *Functional Integration* are variants of the same underlying process. By slowing down and noticing how your body functions, you gain feedback upon which your nervous system can build enhanced self-awareness and improved functioning. In *Awareness Through Movement* you attend to and learn from the feedback provided by your own movement, while in *Functional Integration* that feedback is enhanced by the practitioner's trained awareness and skilled touch.

A short history of the *Method*

The *Feldenkrais Method* was developed by Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, an Israeli physicist and engineer, and an active athlete and martial artist. Finding himself unable to walk when an old knee injury flared up, Feldenkrais wouldn't accept his doctor's recommendation for surgery. The injury hadn't crippled him when it occurred, he reasoned, so perhaps his current disability stemmed not from the injury itself but from something he had done in response to the injury. Perhaps he had adapted in some way that made it worse. And if that were the case, perhaps he could learn to adapt differently, and reduce his pain and limitation.

Feldenkrais began to explore the way he used his knees, initially with small, gentle movements because anything more was painful. He turned his trained analytical mind to the question of how we function as human beings, educating himself in anatomy, neurology, and related subjects, bringing

his experience with judo and other forms of movement to bear as well.

He taught himself to walk again, without pain. He also developed a revolutionary understanding of how human beings learn and function that became the basis for the *Feldenkrais Method*. He first articulated this understanding in *Body and Mature Behavior*, and later through other writing and teaching. His book, *Awareness Through Movement*, provides a good introduction to his thinking.

Feldenkrais devoted himself increasingly to his work with movement, teaching classes in what would later be called *Awareness Through Movement*, as well as working individually with people (called *Functional Integration*). This eventually became his full time work. He began to train practitioners in 1969, with a small training group in Tel Aviv. He taught two trainings in the United States — in San Francisco (1975-77), and in Amherst, Massachusetts (1980-83). At his death in 1984, he had trained approximately 300 practitioners, the majority of them in the United States.

The *Feldenkrais Guild* was established in 1977 to support and represent the practitioners that Feldenkrais had trained. After his death the *Guild* assumed responsibility for the *Method* through such actions as accrediting professional trainings and adopting a code of ethics and standards of practice for practitioners. As practitioners were trained and practitioner organizations established in other countries, the *Guild* limited its activities to the US and Canada. The *International Feldenkrais Federation* was established in 1992 as a federation of practitioner organizations throughout the world.

As of late 1996, there are almost 3000 trained *Feldenkrais* practitioners in more than 30 countries through the world, (1000 of them in the U.S.), and the number is growing rapidly.

When should you consider the *Feldenkrais Method*?

The *Feldenkrais Method* does not treat medical conditions, per se. Instead, it helps you learn to become more self-aware and to move in more efficient, less painful ways. This can help you reduce limitations or discomfort caused by the way you organize your movements and your ways of being in the world. This includes a wide range of limitations, so the *Method* is widely applicable.

Poorly organized movement plays a significant role in most muscular/skeletal complaints. The poor organization may precede the complaint, as when chronic unconscious tensions lead to back pain or repetitive stress injury, or it may result from the complaint, as in the case of protective muscular “splinting” around an injured shoulder that is not released after the shoulder is treated, or both. The *Feldenkrais Method* can help you reduce excessive tension and move more easily and fluidly.

Even when a clearly defined physical condition is present, poorly organized movement may be a major component of the resulting pain and limitation. Back pain may be caused by a herniated disk pressing against a nerve, for example, because of excessive compressive forces resulting from chronically tensed muscles. While the *Feldenkrais Method* does nothing to treat the herniated disk directly, it can help you learn to move with less tension — thus reducing that compressive force and the resulting pressure on the nerve.

Chronic tension and the immobility it produces play a significant role in some chronic pain; reduced tension and enhanced mobility can lead to reduction of that pain. The *Method* can also benefit people with conditions such as fibromyalgia, and can be used to enhance self-awareness and mobility for people with neurological limitations such as stroke or cerebral palsy.

Emotional stresses are held in the body as patterns of tension and lack of awareness. The *Feldenkrais Method* can provide a gentle, safe way to unlock those stresses and restore self-awareness, whether they are the stresses of everyday life or result from trauma such as sexual abuse or combat experience.

The benefits are not limited to those who are injured or ill. Lack of awareness imposes significant unconscious limitations on all of us. The *Feldenkrais Method* provides a tool for self-exploration and self-improvement that can benefit everyone, from the seriously impaired to the normally functioning, and even to high-functioning people who want to function at a still higher level. World class athletes and performers have enhanced their performance using the *Method*.

You can experience the *Feldenkrais Method* through different avenues, including individual work in *Functional Integration*, classes or workshops

in *Awareness Through Movement*, by working with *Awareness Through Movement* tapes at home, or various combinations of these. All these avenues are experiential. You cannot benefit from the *Method* by reading or thinking about it; you must participate. The benefits come from direct experiential involvement; the *Method* is simply a tool for shaping and directing that involvement.

The particular combination that works best for you will depend on your individual circumstances. Classes must accommodate the needs of a number of people simultaneously, while individual sessions can focus more directly on your particular needs. Individual sessions are often best for someone who has a significant impairment, or who wants to explore a particular problem in depth. Classes are less expensive than individual sessions, and provide a different kind of involvement. Some people start with individual sessions and move to classes as they feel more at ease with their movements. Others begin with classes, possibly supplementing them with individual sessions when they encounter an issue that seems better addressed in that way.

Tapes are inexpensive and easy to use. You can listen to them at your convenience, and you can explore the same lesson in different ways. Tapes are most valuable after you have gained some understanding of the process by working with a live practitioner, but can be used by themselves if you are unable to work with a practitioner.

How long you spend with the *Feldenkrais Method* is up to you. Some people come for a short time to deal with a particular problem and leave when that problem is solved. Others find deeper levels of themselves to explore, and stay with the *Method* for an extended period or return to it from time to time for new inspiration.

The process of growth and self-exploration is a life-long process. The *Feldenkrais Method* is a tool to use in that process, which different people will find useful in different ways. Decisions about how you can best utilize that tool are ultimately yours, they are not decisions that a practitioner can make for you.

Contraindications, caveats, and cautions

The *Feldenkrais Method* is gentle and non-invasive, and has no contraindications in the medical sense of that term. There are, nonetheless, some cautions and caveats that should be noted.

The *Feldenkrais Method* should be thought of as a tool for long term change and not as a treatment for acute conditions. Working directly with inflamed areas should generally be avoided, either by working indirectly through other areas of the body, or by waiting until the inflammation subsides,

Pain is a signal of something wrong; it should not be ignored. *Feldenkrais* practitioners have no medical training and are not qualified to diagnose or treat medical conditions. If you have persistent pain or other symptoms you should seek the advice of a competent physician to determine if any condition requiring medical treatment is present. Once you understand the situation medically, you can then decide intelligently how to utilize the *Feldenkrais Method*, by itself or in combination with other modalities.

“No pain, no gain” is *NOT* a *Feldenkrais* motto. If you feel discomfort during a *Functional Integration* session you should bring this to your practitioner’s attention. In *Awareness Through Movement*, you should be easy and gentle with yourself. If you experience discomfort, you should do less — even if this means imagining the movement, or stopping temporarily. The process is about learning, not exercise, and you do not gain from effort or stress.

These cautions are particularly important when you work with tapes, because you’re on your own with no one to monitor you. Lessons may involve many repetitions of the same movement. Done gently and with awareness, those repetitions can help you learn to move more easily. Done roughly and with effort, the same repetitions can create injury.

Some final thoughts

After their first *Functional Integration* session, clients sometimes ask “How can something so gentle and non-invasive be so powerful?” The answer lies in the nature of the interaction between practitioner and client.

A client asks that question, I believe, because of prior experience with some modality where the practitioner’s aim was to produce some physical change — to realign her spine, perhaps, or restructure her connective tissue. To do this, that practitioner needed to exert enough physical force to bring that change about, so the client came to equate force with efficacy.

In *Functional Integration*, no physical change is intended, so no requirement for force exists. Your interaction with the practitioner is an exchange of information. The practitioner explores and monitors your organization and your response to touch and movement, and feeds back information about what you are doing and possible alternatives. This exchange requires little effort, so you experience it as gentle and non-invasive.

Another question I'm asked is "What makes the *Feldenkrais Method* different from other modalities?" I've covered parts of the answer — that the *Method* is a learning process and not a treatment, and that it is gentle and non-invasive. I want to look now at one more difference which I believe lies at the heart of the *Method* — the ultimate source of knowledge on which it depends.

For most modalities, their ultimate source is external. In medicine, for example, it resides in the body of scientific medical knowledge — about pathology, the effects of treatment, etc. The medical practitioner is assumed to know more about that knowledge than you do, and so takes on the role of an authority figure. His job is to determine how you deviate from some ideal dictated by that knowledge, then move you back into better alignment with it.

The ultimate source of knowledge on which the *Feldenkrais Method* draws is *your* innate organic sense of rightness and comfort. The *Feldenkrais* practitioner is not an authority who will teach you the "right" way to move, or do anything else. Instead, his or her job is to help you uncover and remove the unconscious blocks that keep you from accessing your organic sense of rightness and comfort, so you can draw upon it more freely and effectively. This allows you to become more of the person you were really meant to be.

What I find most personally appealing about the *Feldenkrais Method* is the opportunity it offers us for greater control over our lives. This isn't something that someone else *does to* you; it's a way of getting in touch with knowledge and capability you didn't know you possessed, and using that to make your life better. This aspect of my work is immensely satisfying as to me as a practitioner. Not only do I help my clients in the short term; I empower them and give them tools they can benefit from for the rest of their lives.

I also find the underlying ideas deeply

satisfying intellectually. In my earlier career as a mathematician, my research focused on the use of information to improve decisionmaking. This is what the *Feldenkrais Method* is about. It helps you learn to make better use of information available from your body — to improve your movements and your interactions with the world around you. When I met Moshe Feldenkrais, part of what drew me to him was the way his work applied principles and concepts in which I believed, to improve the way we function as individual human beings.

References

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