

from

Dr. Andrew Weil's

Self-Healing

Creating Natural Health for Your Body and Mind

Focus on Therapy

The Feldenkrais Method: Moving with Ease

Have you ever watched a baby learn how to crawl, sit, stand or walk? The *Feldenkrais Method* is based on the premise that we have all forgotten how to move with such natural ease and awareness. By paying close attention to the signals our bodies give us and gently exploring new ways of moving, claim practitioners, we can rediscover the free, effortless sense of movement we had in the first few years of life—and undo many of the aches and pains that plague us as adults who have become literally too set in our ways.

I have long been intrigued by this subtle form of retraining the nervous system, which I currently recommend to patients whose movement has been restricted by injury, cerebral palsy, stroke, fibromyalgia, or chronic pain. I find it to be much more useful than standard physical therapy. I also believe that the *Feldenkrais Method* can help older people achieve greater range of motion and flexibility, and help all of us feel more comfortable in our bodies.

Retraining the Nervous System

Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais ((1904-1984), a Russian-born physicist, martial arts expert, and mechanical engineer, developed the modality that bears his name to cure his own debilitating injury. As a young man, Feldenkrais moved to Paris to acquire a doctorate in science from the Sorbonne and also worked with Figaro Kano, the developer of modern judo, to become one of the first Europeans to earn a black belt. When a bus accident around 1940 aggravated an old knee injury and doctors told him he would never walk again without surgery—which offered only a 50 percent chance of success—Feldenkrais decided there must be a better way. Drawing from his background in martial arts, physics, and engineering, as well as his observations of children's movements, he used his body as a laboratory, experimenting with minimal motions and carefully noting the results. After months on this practice, he regained full use of his knee and soon began teaching his discoveries to friends.

Feldenkrais believed that most of us go through life using habitual patterns of movement that may be limiting or inefficient. We may have developed these patterns to compensate for past injuries or learned them on the job (through performing repetitive motions or sitting for long periods). Yet few of us really pay attention to how our bodies move until something hurts. The key to healing, Feldenkrais felt, is learning to be aware of these unconscious patterns of movement, and experimenting with new possibilities until you find ways to move with the least

effort and strain. Through repetition, your “learns” these new, more-efficient movements and can program the brain and nervous system to incorporate them into your everyday functioning.

Today, there are more than 1,000 *Feldenkrais Method* practitioners working in the United States and Canada, leading group classes and offering private sessions to everyone from cab drivers and computer-bound office workers to sufferers of arthritis and multiple sclerosis. It is a popular modality among musicians and athletes (including violinist Yehuda Menuhin, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and basketball star Julius Erving), who use it to improve coordination and enhance performance, as well as actors who simply want to use their bodies more gracefully.

Last year an interesting German study even found the *Feldenkrais Method* to be a useful treatment for eating disorders: Compared to a control group, the patients who attended a series of Feldenkrais classes showed increased acceptance of their bodies, decreased feelings of helplessness, and more confident behavior.

A Moving Experience

Feldenkrais work is taught in two different modes: *Awareness Through Movement* group classes use verbal instructions to guide students in deceptively simple floor exercises, using common movements like bending, turning, leaning, and breathing to help each person discover the ways he or she moves most easily. In private *Functional Integration* sessions, the practitioner offers gentle hands-on guidance in performing movements that are tailored to the individual’s particular condition.

An initial private session typically lasts 60 minutes and begins with a health history and a “body scan,” with the practitioner guiding you in a series of self-observations designed to detect areas of tension or dysfunction. Then the practitioner asks you to lie or sit on a low padded table, fully clothed, and lightly guides you in a fluid series of movements while noting, and avoiding, areas of strain. In working with someone who has arthritic pain in the hands, for example, the practitioner might help the client explore subtle movements involving the hands but which don’t stress the affected joints. The client might be instructed to practice these movements at home until the body “learns” them through repetition.

Because *Feldenkrais* work is a learning process, most practitioners recommend a minimum of four private sessions, scheduled once or twice a week, in order to affect a sustainable result. Some people with chronic pain or other serious conditions opt for ongoing sessions. Another, less-expensive option is to attend the group classes, which are now being offered in settings from music schools to nursing homes to holistic health centers.

Certified *Feldenkrais* practitioners must complete 800-1,000 hours of training over a three to four-year period, involving both theoretical study and hand-on practice. To locate a qualified instructor near you, contact the *Feldenkrais Guild* (800) 775-2118

or www.feldenkrais.com. While there is no real substitute for working with a practitioner, I recommend the clearly written book *Awareness Heals: The Feldenkrais Method for Dynamic Health*, by Steven Shafarman (Addison-Wesley, 1997). It includes six basic lessons to help you become more aware of how you sit, walk, and otherwise move.

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