The Feldenkrais Method®

Maggy Burrowes, a Feldenkrais practitioner and teacher, provides an introduction to the method that promotes learning about movement, posture and breathing in order to develop our full human potential.

‘Feldenkrais is the most sophisticated and effective method I have seen for the prevention and reversal of deterioration of function. We’re condemning millions of people to a deteriorated old age that’s not necessary’.

Margaret Mead Ph.D. in Human Health, Anthropologist

We don’t tend to pay much attention to how we organise ourselves to move every day. At some time in your life you have probably been instructed to lift heavy things with a straight back and bent knees, and most of us have discovered how ineffective it is to be told to ‘sit up straight!’ but that is probably the extent of the functional advice the majority of us have been given in life.

As we get older the cumulative effects of our unconscious habits of self-use manifest themselves physically in all kinds of ways; perhaps an ache in your neck that sometimes intensifies overnight so that you wake up with numbness or tingling in your hand; maybe you suffer intermittent bouts of sciatica without any obvious trigger; maybe playing your instrument or typing several days in a row leaves you with knotted shoulders or lower back pain. Is there something you love that you don’t do anymore because it causes you problems? Perhaps you have given up tennis, horse riding or running due to persistent injuries. Perhaps your back aches if you spend too much time at an art gallery, or browsing in a department store. Perhaps you catch sight of an unexpected reflection of yourself and think ‘Oh! I must be getting old’.

The Feldenkrais Method® offers hundreds of lessons designed to improve how we go about our everyday actions (sitting, standing, reaching, leaning, bending, rolling over in bed - the list is endless) by increasing our awareness of our muscles and our skeletal structure, and organising ourselves to act more efficiently, more spontaneously, more gracefully, and more naturally.

Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, D.Sc. was a distinguished scientist and engineer. He was a close associate of Nobel Prize Laureate Frederic Joliet-Curie, and he worked at the Curie Institute in Paris in the 1930s. He was also a respected judo instructor, a founder of the Ju Jitsu Club in Paris, and the author of two books on the subject. However, it was in the relationship between bodily movement and the ways we think, feel and learn that Dr. Feldenkrais achieved his greatest successes, and today there are several thousand certified Feldenkrais teachers around the globe, with new training programmes springing up every year as awareness of the work grows.

Feldenkrais’ insights contributed to the development of the new field of somatic education and
continue to influence disciplines such as physical medicine, gerontology, the arts, education and psychology.

It was an old soccer injury in his youth that damaged his knee and led to the threat of severe disability in middle age. Given little hope of ever walking normally, Moshe refused surgery because he found the 50/50 chance of improvement he was offered an unacceptable gamble. Instead, he applied his extensive knowledge of anatomy, physiology, psychology and engineering, as well as his mastery of martial arts, to heal his own knee. It was during this healing process that he realised the vital importance of working with the whole self, body and mind, in order to achieve persistent change. Realising how significant his discoveries were, he began to teach this work to his colleagues at the British Admiralty during the war, and then went on to fully develop his method on his return home to Israel.

Dr. Feldenkrais thought like an engineer and a martial artist. He saw good posture as a state of relaxed readiness, and felt that one should be able to move in any direction without preparation, i.e. without physical or mental adjustment:

‘The aim is a body that is organised to move with minimum effort and maximum efficiency, not through muscular strength, but increased consciousness of how it works’.

His engineer’s appreciation of the relationship between structure and function brought him to the understanding that the human form with its naturally high centre of gravity demands that we embrace our inherent lack of stability and develop a fluid relationship with balance. In order to become a fully realised ‘potent’ human being, we need to learn to dance with gravity, not fight it. When we tense our muscles to fight gravity, bracing ourselves to face our daily stresses, life becomes a constant struggle, our bodies harden and start to ‘age’ and our choices seem more and more limited. We find ourselves steadily losing the ability to use the very adaptability that defines our humanity. He set about designing a learning process that would enable anyone to regain the spontaneity and exploratory confidence of the developing toddler, increasing self-awareness and mental agility at the same time, enabling users of the method to embrace the flexibility and self-awareness that enables us to create brand new strategies, and make the best possible choices in unfamiliar situations.

‘The human posture is not simple nor is it easy to achieve. It necessitates a long and demanding apprenticeship. The learning that each human being has to go through to achieve the best quality of functioning his structure permits is as remarkable as anything in nature’.

The Elusive Obvious, Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais (1981)

The therapeutic learning process Feldenkrais developed helps us to release ourselves from the long-term, chronic muscle tensions that distort our posture and make it difficult to do the things we used to do with ease as children, and it also trains us to maintain these improvements by incorporating what has been learnt into our daily lives. The most wonderful thing about the Feldenkrais Method® is that although the potential for change is great, the movements employed for the purpose are slow and subtle, avoiding extreme positions and extraneous effort, and are therefore suitable for people unable to handle more strenuous bodywork methods, including people with injuries, whether chronic or acute. Classes are so gentle that they are within the abilities of many sufferers of chronic fatigue.

We tend to notice quickly when others’ assumptions and certainties are interfering with the openness of their minds; it is much less easy to be aware of how our own beliefs are limiting our possibilities. There is magic in the suspension of certainty - the ability to simply observe and
wonder a little, putting what you already know on hold. Feldenkrais knew that most human cultures privilege doing things ‘correctly’ and so he included in his teaching method processes designed to guide his students away from the inflexibility of knowing the one right way to do something. Fundamental to the Method is the concept of the importance of maintaining a ‘beginner’s mind’. Awareness Through Movement classes and Functional Integration one-to-one lessons are tools to enable the student to become aware of rigidities of mind and body – indeed it is only the fundamental inaccuracies of our language that encourage the limiting idea that these aspects of ourselves are in any way separate from each other.

Benefits

- May provide relief from pain, chronic muscle tension and spasms
- Stress reduction
- Improved breathing
- Increased flexibility, agility and grace
- Increased energy
- Improved sexual functioning

The Method may be for you if:

- You suffer from restricted movement or pain
- You suffer from respiratory problems, fatigue or anxiety
- You want to increase your vitality and well-being
- You want to become more graceful and agile
- You are a performer wishing to refine your art and improve your skills
- An injury has disturbed the way your body functions
- You are involved in sports or movement teaching
- You wish to enhance your personal process of self-discovery and self-awareness
- You have suffered brain injury, or a disturbance of the nervous system

Functional Integration (FI): private lessons in the Method

In a one-to-one FI lesson you lie fully-clothed on a low table as your teacher’s hands gently support you, suggesting, encouraging and guiding you towards new ways of moving and organising yourself. Each lesson is unique and designed specifically for you. Students often experience some improvement by the end of the first lesson, however posture problems that have taken many years to develop don’t disappear overnight – that kind of change necessitates long-term commitment and ‘homework’. Each lesson includes time for discussion before and after the hands-on session, and special movements to explore at home, tailored to your needs and movement goals. Because the work involves hands-on stimulation of the nervous system via the skeleton it is effective for serious conditions like multiple sclerosis, cerebellar palsy or Parkinson’s disease - not by providing a ‘cure’, but by making everyday life easier and less painful, and often delaying the pace of deterioration. It is particularly ideal for locating and eliminating the causes of repetitive strain injury (RSI).

Awareness Through Movement (ATM): classes and workshops

An ATM lesson is an organised sequence of related movements, put together in such a way as to guide you through a process of new learning and self-discovery. As your teacher talks you through the lesson, you learn to focus your attention on your internal sensations, and to use this new awareness to release chronic muscle tension and create new movement possibilities for yourself.
Lessons usually take place on the floor or in a chair. Each new movement is repeated several times to enable your nervous system to become familiar with the new pattern. You may well find yourself doing something with ease that you haven’t been able to do for years. As Feldenkrais teachers, our ‘modus operandi’ is to encourage play, exploration and discovery as the most effective learning tools for life.

‘I have long been intrigued by this subtle form of retraining the nervous system, which I 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’.

Andrew Weil, M.D., Author of Spontaneous Healing and Natural Health, Natural Medicine

‘I can’t say enough good things about the Feldenkrais Method®. I believe it’s made the difference between continuing my competitive running career and retiring prematurely’.

Chris Boyd, 1992 US Track National Champion (5,000 meters)

‘Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais has developed a system that is many years ahead of conventional medical understanding. Following the program with Feldenkrais, patients showed significant improvement in their levels of pain, decreased numbers of medications, and increased quality of life’.


Further information

- For more information about Feldenkrais or practitioner training, or to find a teacher in your area, visit www.feldenkrais.co.uk
- Maggy Burrowes lives and works in London – www.vocaldynamix.com T. 07976 640737
- Caroline Scott lives and works in West Yorkshire – T. 01422 882 923 or 07963 239 816
- For information about training in London in October 2011, visit www.feldenkraislondon.com
- For ongoing training opportunities in Sussex, visit www.feldenkrais-itc.com