

Exercise in Awareness

The Feldenkrais Method® Emphasizes Knowledge of the Body and Safer, Efficient Movement

by Liz Brody (Special to the LA Times) Monday, June 29, 1998

Staying fit into the millennium may mean working out less for your money. That's because after doing an ATM class, your body will move as smoothly as the slide of a debit card.

But ATM in this case stands for Awareness Through Movement®, and the classes are part of the Feldenkrais Method, which many say makes exercise: as easy and efficient as automatic banking.

Brought to this country in the 1970s by its originator, Moshe Feldenkrais, a Ukrainian-born physicist and engineer plagued by a knee injury, the method has long been a professional secret among dancers, actors and musicians.

But recently the fitness community has gotten hep to the benefits, and a few on the front lines are serving up Feldenkrais as the latest physical elixir. "We like to stay on the cutting edge," says Karen Joy, general manager of Fitness for Her! In San Diego, one of the health clubs around the country now offering ATM classes alongside step and sculpt.

Basically, Feldenkrais is an educational approach that teaches students to become aware of their bodies and move as seamlessly as possible. For an actor, that can mean getting into character more convincingly; for an Olympian, shaving the winning second off a sprint, for a stroke patient, learning to walk again.

As for the rest of us, it could be just what the trainer ordered. Rather than a replacement for those calorie-blasting workouts that rev the engines, Feldenkrais is the oil that can perfect your performance and stop you from getting rusty over time. "Many people quit exercising because they hurt themselves," says Andrea Wiener, president of the Feldenkrais Guild®, an organization that regulates its member practitioners. "This method helps you both prevent and recover from injuries, and enjoy what you love to do more."

Frances Fisher doesn't need convincing. "Feldenkrais

has taken the struggle out of exercise," says the actress, who used ATM exercises to keep her energy flowing on the set of "Titanic" during long days of filming in a corset.

"Before I did this, I found myself walking around like these guys at the gym who have a lot of muscle but can't lift their arms. With the Feldenkrais, I'm not thinking about making my muscles stronger. I'm aware of how my skeleton is moving in space and how my muscles and nerves are responding, so my body is much more relaxed, responsive and flexible. As I get older, I'm more interested in flexibility because flexibility is youth."

'Feldenkrais teaches you to pay attention to the quality versus the quantity of motion. It expands your physical imagination.'

Frank Wildman - Director of Movement Studies Institute, Berkeley CA

There are two ways to study the method. With Functional Integration®, a practitioner works on you privately, gently guiding your body into improved ways of moving as you sit or lie down, fully clothed. The ATM lessons, which you take in group classes or practice at home with tapes, help you make the same kinds of discoveries on your own through thousands of movements--some so subtle that observing them is like watching paint dry.

Both Functional Integration and ATM lessons (many students do only one; others combine the two) are based on the idea that each of us inevitably develops unhealthy movement habits through years of going about life on automatic pilot, overusing the body in repetitive ways and nursing old injuries. Feldenkrais teaches you how to notice these stressful patterns and replace them with more comfortable, efficient ones, so that, as one practitioner put it, you're not using the force of chewing a steak to eat a cream puff.

In a way, the education is like receiving a Thomas Guide to your body that shows you in detail how you normally move and then lets you find alternate routes to avoid an accident down the road.

Having that full body map, practitioners say, is important because when a knee gives you problems or a shoulder aches, your whole system is affected.

Pauline Sugine, co-owner of the Center for Physical Health in Los Angeles, describes working with Martina Navratilova: "I showed her that as the result of an injury to the right ankle, when she moved her head to the right, even just her eyes, she stopped breathing," says Sugine. "In tennis, if you look in one direction and a part of your body freezes, even subconsciously, then you lose the connection. It's sort of like driving with a flat tire. Not only is your tire flat, but if you keep driving, more things go wrong."

Through Functional Integration, Sugine kinesthetically reminded Navratilova how to look right and breathe at the same time, getting her whole body, including the ankle, in top form again.

The beauty of Feldenkrais is, you don't have to understand it intellectually. "Whether you get it on a conscious level or not, your nervous system is picking it up," says Sugine. "It's like we're smugging the information in."

Advocates of Feldenkrais say such movement education has been the missing link in fitness as we know it-- which is why, after 25 years of pounding the pavement, many of us are limping toward burnout.

"The Western approach to athletic training is almost exclusively based on overload and compensation," says Ken Largent, director of Movement Facilitation in Portland, Ore., who works with many athletes. "The Feldenkrais approach looks at movement from a neurological standpoint. So, for example, it looks at how effective you are in using the least amount of effort to accomplish your ends. This is almost the opposite of the concept we've all been working under--not that it's superior, but it is necessary. There is a yin and yang. What we need is the fullness of both."

Frank Wildman, past president of the Feldenkrais Guild and director of the Movement Studies Institute in Berkeley, goes even further. "The routine, boring exercises people do don't take into account the human ability for self-reflection and awareness," he says. "This is what Feldenkrais offers. We're after physical intelligence."

Wildman explains that we've come to view the body as a machine, measuring our workouts in numbers, clocks and weights. However, when you watch someone like Michael Jordan, what's really beautiful is not how high he jumps, but the way he slips in so many points without seeming to try, his amazing coordination, his elegance and grace. "Feldenkrais teaches you to pay attention to the quality versus the quantity of motion," he says. "It expands your physical imagination."

This, of course, is why performers love the method. When, after years of weight lifting, Fisher needed to play a stripper in a film, she went to choreographer Kim Blank, who uses Feldenkrais in her coaching. "Frances was very strong and muscular," says Blank, "so I'd start her on the floor with an ATM exercise showing how the pelvis connects to the spine and the sense of fluid, undulating movement appropriate to a stripper doing a routine. And then we went on to the choreography."

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Frances Fisher, actor

Fisher says this work helped her access an inner, organic sensuality while giving her body a more elongated look. "It's a great tool for getting into any character," she adds.

And that's true whether you're an actress, athlete -- nowhere close to being either.

Ultimately, Feldenkrais is a way to explore yourself and build the kind of inner fitness that lets you jump into any situation-- whether it's playing a film role, learning a sport or going for a job interview. "Feldenkrais helps you act connected and there's something so inherently satisfying about that," says Blank. "When you move with grace and ease, you can't help but feel joy. There's a sense of calm, a sense of being more grounded."

Who wouldn't want to cash in on that?

To find a Guild-Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner near you (a title that reflects 800-1,000 classroom hours of training over a three- to four-year period), contact the Feldenkrais Guild of North America, 1-800-775- 2118, or www.feldenkrais.com.

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