

# Re-learning grace and agility through movement

by Stephen Douglas

Sometimes I'm awestruck by the grace and agility of certain animals. The way a giraffe moves their neck when walking. The spring of a horse over a jump. Or, the pounce of a housecat... Animals have a natural grace in the way they move. Interestingly, babies and young children have this innate ability, as well. They're supple, flexible, and move with ease.

We lose that ability, to a large degree, as we age. Our bodies adapt to the way we live our lives. Our posture, over time, signals what we do for the majority of our day. I can tell from a person's posture if they work at a computer all day or if they work outside in construction. We develop patterns of inefficiencies or we get set in our ways, literally. Our bodies adapt out of habit, and it shows.

**The Feldenkrais Method**, named after the distinguished scientist Moshe Feldenkrais, is based on the premise that we've forgotten how to move naturally. But, through simple movements and deceptively comfortable exercises, we can rediscover the efficient, graceful movements our bodies were born with. Essentially, we re-learn to move without wasted effort or energy. We also learn greater awareness of our own body position and movements. Feldenkrais's teachings are recognized as a dynamic therapy to improve neuromuscular control and biomechanical efficiency.

Feldenkrais helps you:

- feel at home in your body
- relieve chronic discomfort and eliminate pain
- speed recovery from injury
- improve posture, flexibility and coordination
- regain mobility and strength
- perform better and refine skills as a musician, dancer, martial artist, athlete,

any kind of movement

- deal with neurological damage or learning disabilities
- become more flexible in your psychological patterns

Formally, Feldenkrais is an educational system that develops a functional awareness of the self in the environment using two methods.

In **Awareness Through Movement® (ATM)** classes, your Feldenkrais practitioner/instructor verbally leads you through series of movements. You learn to replace old, restrictive habits with a new sense of ease and freedom. You work gently and pace yourself through deceptively simple movements. ATM is safe and effective for a wide range of ability levels and ages. Classes, usually 20 minutes to an hour long, are often done in a studio with no special equipment, and you wear ordinary, comfortable clothing. The mechanisms of breathing, speaking and all aspects of postural control are explored and improved while perceptual capacities are increased. The aim of these lessons is not relaxation but healthy, powerful, easy, and pleasurable action.

The movement explorations involve thinking, sensing, moving, and imagining. The lessons are often based on developmental movements, like rolling, crawling, or moving from lying to sitting; or explorations of joint, muscle, and postural relationships. Minute, barely perceptible movements are used extensively to reduce hidden habits in the muscles.

An important goal of ATM lessons is to learn how the most basic movement functions are organized and to teach awareness of your skeleton and its orientation. Since learning

is a highly individual matter, students are encouraged to learn at their own pace in a noncompetitive manner. This is why the same lesson will benefit people of diverse ages, backgrounds, and abilities.

### **Functional Integration (FI)**

Feldenkrais offers hands-on techniques called Functional Integration (FI). Each FI session is individually tailored and is usually performed with the person lying on a low table to reduce the influence of gravity on the body. Gravity is a force we get used to, obviously. But, it's difficult to re-learn movements when similar forces, like gravity, continue to influence our body.

The Feldenkrais practitioner communicates through gentle, noninvasive touch and simple movements. They may lift your leg, bend your knee, or cross your arm across your chest. Touch, in this case, is instructive and informative, not corrective.

The Feldenkrais practitioner creates movements, which allow patients to experience differences between effortful and effortless, efficient and inefficient, neutral and pleasurable movements. Unless individuals can sense these distinctions, they have no choice over the quality of their movements. Once they learn to differentiate movements and their qualities, they acquire alternative ways of performing the same task and regain a broader range of their possibilities.

### **Evidence Based**

The first research study involving Feldenkrais Method (FM) was published in 1977 with an increasing amount of serious study being done since 1988. Because FM has such a wide range of effects, a wide range of outcomes has been studied and reported. Most of the clinical studies to date have involved a very small number of subjects and break down into the following four general themes.

1. Pain Management: Case studies describing the resolution of chronic back pain following the failure of other methods to address the problems have been published. A retrospective study of 34

patients using FM as an adjunct to treatment in a chronic pain management clinic showed that FM helped to reduce the pain and improve function and was continued, independently, by patients. A study using a group ATM intervention with five fibromyalgia patients showed significant decrease in pain and improved posture, gait, sleep, and body awareness. Another study showed decreased pain and improved function, including improved biomechanic efficiency, measured by motion analysis, in several people with rheumatoid arthritis following six weeks of ATM lessons.

2. Functional Performance and Motor Control: Function is a result of movement. Changes in the control of movement therefore influence function. Functional improvements have been described in people with neurologic diagnoses including orthopedic patients. Although there was no formal quantitative assessment of balance, four women with multiple sclerosis reported improvements in balance and improved walking and transfers. Improvements in posture among Parkinson's disease patients was noted using FM as part of treatment. Case studies of two children with cerebral palsy show major functional gains during several years of FM work. As well as improving function in people with impairments, FM is also used to improve athletic performance. At this time, evidence is anecdotal among skiers and kayakers. There is also interest in athletic injury prevention using ATM to improve flexibility and control.

3. Psychologic Effects: Feldenkrais' initial intentions in the application of his work were to improve a person's awareness of the body in action (Awareness Through Movement), improving the integration of functions (Functional Integration) and thereby effect a process of change leading to greater emotional maturity. This aspect of Feldenkrais has been studied very little. Several studies are under way among patients with multiple sclerosis and fibromyalgia. Recently, in a control group study of 30 children with eating disorders, researchers concluded that a course of ATM facilitated an acceptance of the body and

self, decreased feelings of helplessness and dependence, increased self-confidence and a general process of maturation of the whole personality.

4. Quality of Life: Quality of life and its associated measures of perceived health status is becoming an increasingly important and widely used method for assessing rehabilitation outcomes. In one small study a trend towards improved perception of health was noted. This finding has been corroborated in other studies of improvements in vitality and mental health in a group of women with multiple sclerosis.

### **Risk and Safety**

There is very little risk involved in the use of the Feldenkrais Method. It's both conservative and safe. People are instructed to stay within the bounds of pain-free ranges of motion and use as little effort as possible to perform a movement. Comfort and ease are understood to be part of the optimal conditions for learning.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead called it "the most sophisticated and effective method I have seen for the prevention and reversal of the deterioration of function."

Andrew Weil, MD, says, "I recommend the Feldenkrais Method 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."

### **Lesson #1**

I attended a Feldenkrais class and it was awe-inspiring and enlightening. Our graceful and supple instructor, Marion Harris, led a group of us through a series of movements. My walking lesson opened my eyes to how easy walking could and should be. Marion

had me walk to the opposite end of the studio. She made some comments about how straight my back was, how square my shoulders were, etc. and I was feeling quite good about my gait. Then, Marion told me to walk backwards to where I'd started. I walked back and forth across that room for about 10 minutes, backwards and forwards, with my eyes open, with my eyes closed, with one eye open, with one arm behind my back. Back and forth. Then Marion told me to rest for a minute and walk ahead, across the room. It's hard to explain the difference or the sensation but my gait, balance, rhythm, and ease had changed. I was much more comfortable after doing the "pattern-scrambling" exercises. What had happened was my body had "unlearned" its familiar walking pattern and I'd adopted a more natural movement.

### **About Moshe Feldenkrais**

The Feldenkrais Method is named after Moshe Feldenkrais, 1904-1984. Dr. Feldenkrais earned his doctorate in Physics at the Sorbonne and later was an associate to the Nobel Prize laureate Frederic Joliot-Curie in Paris. He was also the first European to earn a black belt in judo. When Feldenkrais suffered a serious knee injury, he was faced with a 50% chance of recovery and the possibility of confinement to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Unsatisfied with the prognosis and conventional treatments available, he embarked on exploring new relationships between the mind and body to improve physical movement and function. For 40 years, Feldenkrais developed an ingenious method for effective neuromuscular re-education.

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