

The Feldenkrais Method: Flexible Minds Create Flexible Bodies

"I'm interested in flexible minds, not flexible bodies," is what physicist Moshe Feldenkrais said of his method in relation to human potential and development. Incapacitated by injuries to both his knees and given a 50% possibility of walking again were he to undergo surgical interventions, he opted to use his background in physics, martial arts (he was the first westerner to be awarded a black belt in judo) and the knowledge he gleaned watching the developmental process of his pediatric wife's patients to cure himself.

This is what The Feldenkrais Method® isn't: It's not massage, it's not yoga, it's not Pilates, it's not stretching muscles, it's not energy work, it's not spiritual or eastern or metaphysical, and it doesn't ascribe to the primitive belief that where there is no pain there is no gain. It is the thinking person's somatic method. The good news is that, to a great extent, we CAN heal ourselves. The bad news is that it takes an extraordinary discipline and acute attention to detail to achieve change. Most of us, desperate with hopes that someone ELSE cure us, opt for visits to medics, invasive operations, miracle cures and potions and, sadly, even surrender to the charlatan shaman (who the week before was a waiter at Johnny Rockets hamburger chain on Melrose Avenue). Self-examination and discovery is much too much work for the majority. If self-healing and illumination were achieved by nothing more than the repetition of new-age platitudes, than there would be many more awakened and healthy individuals amongst us. But, as Gurdjieff and Feldenkrais repeatedly stated and instructed, we are LITERALLY- not METAPHORICALLY -asleep, and delude ourselves with the belief that we're awake and conscious.

As the study of neurology continues to develop, more and more of what Feldenkrais taught is being substantiated through science. The sooner an animal is fit to fend for itself after birth, the less capacity it has for learning. The human animal goes through a very long learning period in order to be able to function on its own and, as such, has the greatest potential to learn. And what is learned is learned through kinesthetic exploration, but also by imitation. And imitation is where one can begin to learn incorrectly. Just because your father walks that way, and your mother sits this way doesn't mean it's THE way! We all perform our functions in unique ways and most of us never stop to think whether the way we do things is actually the most functional, elegant, and efficient way to do them. And then as we begin to experience loss of efficiency and function we run

to the nearest yoga center because, you know, it's from India, so it must be good for me!

A baby isn't expected to do sit ups to develop core muscles in order to learn to roll over and stand. A baby (who at the start is only capable of flexion) will, through exploration, self-discovery, and pleasure find the skeletal organization necessary to lift the head, roll over, crawl, and stand. The idea that we must build muscles groups for healthy function is archaic, shortsighted, and the reason so many trainers are in pain and end up looking for relief elsewhere. Ideally, an equal tonus of the muscles would be most beneficial to one's function. But when we're in pain almost every single one of us is willing to have ANYONE do ANYTHING to make us better. We put more examination and thought into selecting toilet tissue than into the person we elect to heal us. As Groucho and Woody Allen said, "Those who can, do, those who can't do, teach, and those who can't teach, teach physical education".

The Feldenkrais Method® is instructed by verbal indications, never by demonstration or intervention. It is not about imitation, it is about self-exploration and is, at its heart, a learning method. How do we do what we do? Do we have at least three options for what we do, whether it be walking, sitting, standing, etc.? Feldenkrais said most of us have only one response to a stimulus and that it's automatic. He said we should have at least three options for every situation and that having more than three would render one a genius, not enslaved to one's body, and graced with the dignity of existing as a free human unencumbered by limitations.

A Feldenkrais Method teacher (certification to become a teacher takes four years and is often done in conjunction with medical school courses in physiology and anatomy) doesn't touch a student, doesn't correct him, or tell him that the way he's doing something is right or wrong. We are our own teachers and the more mistakes we make, the better we learn. The simple act of trying to do something "well" is already an obstacle toward improvement. When one experiences pain doing something, one should find an alternative mode of action. Pain is the brain's way of telling us to stop what we're doing. The French writer Marcel Proust said that the body we have at up to about age 20 (or so) is the one we were born with and that the one we have after that is the one we have created and deserve. We are the products of our habits and our repertoire of habits is very limited. We use limited muscle groups to perform the same functions day to day. And then, five years later, we're surprised when we develop pain and think it has to do with something we did the day before. The more

variety one includes in one's life the better off one will be. How do you brush your teeth? How do you open the door? How do you dice carrots? How do you hold your cell phone? How do you stand when waiting in line? Where do you carry your purse? Where is your billfold? How are you sitting right now? Are you breathing? Are you leaning against the back of your chair? Are you slouched?

Degeneration of function comes about not only because of improper use of the body but ALSO as a result of NOT doing things we used to do when we played as children. When was the last time you jumped? Skipped? Pulled? Pushed? Rolled on the floor? Played with your toes? Another important point is to think of things we do unconsciously which prevent us from elegant movement. Feldenkrais called these unconscious impediments parasitic (muscular) contractions. How do you come to stand from sitting? What do your hands do? What does your cervical spine do? Do you hold your breath? Clench your teeth? Do you rely on effort and speed to accomplish what you want? Any elegant movement should be completely reversible where one can stop midway and go in reverse with no problems. Feldenkrais said, "I want to make the impossible, possible, the possible, simple, and the simple, elegant."

When we feel pain we're willing to listen to almost anyone's idea of how to alleviate it. We guard ourselves with orthotics and walking sticks, and protective shoes and, ironically, INCREASE our degeneration of function with the illusion that we're protecting ourselves from injury and lesions. But It's those things that PUT us on edge and frighten us that help us to have a richer vocabulary of physical function. No shoe is better than a bare foot and every crutch you adopt out of fear will reduce your freedom even more. Dr. Scholls and Nike and all the rest of the mega-corporations are there to make money and their marketing will fill your mind with fears from which only their product can provide you salvation. Just because you saw it on television or someone dressed as a doctor endorsed it doesn't make it true. The fact that someone calls himself a teacher doesn't make him one. As Joni Mitchell sang, "Saying something doesn't make it so."

We don't start hunching downwards because we age. We hunch downward because we've fallen, broken a leg or hip and, frightened we'll do it again, look intently at the ground. We forget that the eyes move independently of the head and bend forward to look at the ground. The central nervous system takes in all the messages transmitted from the eyes, the ears, and the muscles involved and register it as our new default. Soon, we think this is normal and forget what it was like when we stood erect. And if we WERE to actually stand erect, even

momentarily, everything in our nervous system, now trained to the adapted dysfunctional mode of alignment, would lead us to believe we're falling backward and our immediate response would be to bend forward again.

The Feldenkrais Method® is all about the mind and we "simply" use the body as a means to awaken the mind to the possibilities once again. The more the mind is used and activated the better off we'll be. I've had a 90-year-old student attend my classes and have AHA moments within one lesson that the 25-year-old yoga instructor is still struggling to understand one year later. Feldenkrais felt that older students were better suited to understand and reap the benefits of his method because they no longer have excess energy and strength to waste and are finally able to explore the more functional alternatives than the youth who believe impulse, speed, and strength are the roads to well-being.

I strongly suggest you question everything coming out of every "teacher's" mouth and that you seek confirmation through your personally verified experience. The path to awareness is not an easy one to walk but you already know where the paths you've previously trod have brought you.