

As Seen in the Summer 2012 Be Well Baltimore Edition



The Feldenkrais Method: Movement in Mind

By David Zemach-Bersin

In a comfortable, airy room strewn with exercise mats, a Feldenkrais teacher guides her students verbally, as they move their bodies slowly and gently. She invites them to explore a sequence of easy movements, and then to rest, noticing whether one of their legs feels longer than the other. Then, she asks them to notice whether it feels easier when they turn toward the left, or the right. Each student pays attention to his or her own experience, tilting, turning, or gently lengthening an arm or a leg. These movements are extremely simple, but unlike most other forms of exercise, each movement is also packed with valuable neurological information. The movements in a Feldenkrais exercise are functionally based and meaningful, and provide the brain with a therapeutic opportunity in which it can assist the body. When the exercise is finished, the students stand up and walk around the room to explore how they are now feeling. Many will report feeling refreshed and capable, in ways they had long forgotten.

Across town, an 11 year old boy, who broke two ribs while playing sports six months ago, lies down, fully dressed on a low table for an individual Feldenkrais treatment. Though his ribs have technically “healed”, he complains that he can't breathe deeply the way he used to. The practitioner quietly uses gentle touch along the child's spine to help him regain confidence in the flexibility and function of his entire upper torso. The practitioner does not focus on the youngster's injury,

pathology, or diagnosis. Instead, he creates possibilities for improvement by facilitating a natural process of sensory-motor learning in the child's brain. As the child takes his first deep breath in months, he smiles with relief.

The exercise class and the private session are two forms of a somatic therapy called the Feldenkrais Method. Offering a broad range of benefits for people of all ages and abilities, this unusual technique uses the power of the brain to help the body.

Often, necessity is the mother of invention. The Feldenkrais Method is one such case, created by a physicist and engineer named Moshe Feldenkrais when he lost the ability to use his legs after a series of serious knee injuries. Determined to find a solution, he applied his understanding of physics, motor development, biomechanics, psychology, and martial arts, and not only restored his ability to walk, but also developed the work for which he is known today. Over and over again, Feldenkrais found that given the right sort of opportunity, the brain can improve the body's comfort and function. Feldenkrais created exercises to help every part of the body, and devised a mode of hands-on treatment rooted in the fact that when the brain is offered new options for our posture and movement, it will naturally choose better ones on our body's behalf. Simple movements done with basic home-grown awareness, Feldenkrais discovered, are the best way to communicate effectively with the brain and nervous system.

Instead of focusing on symptoms, the Feldenkrais Method works by improving the body's underlying neuromuscular and skeletal organization. Although we know that body and mind are exquisitely intertwined, few of us understand the profound connection between our habitual posture and our psychological habit patterns. We assume that we simply "are" the way we are, and while caught in a web of unconscious patterns, believe that we have only one way of doing things. What the Feldenkrais Method does, is to restore our sense of having options and choices. Georgetown University neuroscientist Karl Pribram once said, "Feldenkrais is not just pushing muscles around, but changing things in the brain itself." With better muscular and skeletal organization, many aspects of our physical comfort and functioning can change and improve. By engaging the brain's plasticity, or ability to

change, Feldenkrais gives us an opportunity to change even our most engrained habits of posture and movement.

The Feldenkrais Method is available in two complimentary forms. The exercises, also called Awareness Through Movement lessons, are presented verbally to a group, or can be done independently at home.

Feldenkrais treatment sessions, also called Functional Integration lessons, involve a hands-on approach, as a practitioner individualizes the work. Both forms of the Feldenkrais Method are safe, enjoyable, and can be immediately effective.

As the Feldenkrais Method steadily gains recognition, people are increasingly turning to it for help with a wide range of issues. Some people use it to speed their recovery from injury, or because they wish to avoid the physical limitations commonly associated with aging. Others use it to reduce tension, or to improve athletic abilities. It is being embraced by performing artists all over the world, by parents of children with developmental issues, and people dealing with the aches caused by long days spent sitting in front of computer screens.

The famous anthropologist, Margaret Mead, once said that, “the Feldenkrais Method is the most sophisticated and effective method I have seen for the prevention and reversal of deterioration of function.” Well worth exploring, the Feldenkrais Method offers each person an opportunity in which they can experience their potential for improvement. Sometimes, all we need to do is remember what feeling better feels like.

David Zemach-Bersin is the Director of the Baltimore Feldenkrais Method Training Program, beginning in August, 2012. One of Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais' original American students, David studied with Dr. Feldenkrais for over a decade, in the U.S., England, and Israel. For over 30 years he has been an international leader in the practice and development of The Feldenkrais Method.