The Feldenkrais Method®: Learning Through Experience

by Buffy Owens
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Inner IDEA: This brief introduction includes a sample Awareness Through Movement® lesson.

The Feldenkrais Method of somatic education offers a holistic approach to human development and motor function improvement through the medium of movement and sensation. The effectiveness of the method lies in its ability to work with the whole person. It is based on the premise that through personal experience we develop habitual patterns of physical and psychological behavior—movement and thought—to ensure our personal, biological and social comfort. Over time these patterns become deeply embedded in our neurological systems and can become “blocks” to new ways of thinking, feeling and moving (Feldenkrais 1949).

The method’s creator, Moshe Feldenkrais, emphasized that the most effective way to improve our activity and reaction patterns was to work with four complex and interacting elements: the nervous system, the skeleton, the muscles and the environment. The environment, as he used the term, included the self and self-image, spatial and temporal aspects, and our relationship with social and cultural influences (Feldenkrais 2010). (For a brief biography of Moshe Feldenkrais, see the sidebar “Moshe Feldenkrais: Mind-Body Movement Pioneer.”)

How The Method Is Taught

The Feldenkrais Method comprises two separate and unique modalities that are grounded in the same theoretical philosophy: Awareness Through Movement Classes and Functional Integration® sessions. Both modalities harness the power of awareness and of function-based exploration of the body to improve movement and self-understanding. This method is not a series of treatments or exercises, but rather a re-education of the mind and body. The student begins to learn about her movement habits while expanding her movement repertoire. This ultimately leads to enhanced strength, improved flexibility and the ability to quickly reorganize the body for more efficient movement.

The Feldenkrais Method is extremely useful for those recovering from an injury or suffering from chronic pain. It is also a powerful ally for elite athletes and expressive artists. For an athlete, it can mean acquiring the ability to sense and shift poorly organized movement
patterns—and thereby enhance performance by adopting more efficient ways to move. For an actor, the ability to step out of his own habits of moving and emoting allows him to fully embody his character.

**Awareness Through Movement classes**

Awareness Through Movement classes verbally guide participants through a series of gentle and sophisticated movement sequences. The focus of the lessons is on guiding the students to discover for themselves how they move; for example, where they use unnecessary effort or add unconscious constraints. Over the course of a lesson, students find out for themselves the best way to organize their own unique movement. Often, movements that seemed impossible become possible, and movements that were possible become effortless. At no time during a lesson are students told how to do a movement; rather, they are guided through a somatic exploration that allows them to discover how to embody the movement.

Each class gracefully merges the unique human capacity for understanding the world through language with the sensory motor processes of the brain. Nearly all lessons involve attention, perception, imagination and cognition. There are hundreds of lessons, ranging from those that are performed purely in the imagination to more vigorous lessons involving judo rolls and headstands. Each lesson addresses every joint and muscle group in the body.

**Functional Integration Sessions**

Functional Integration is a one-on-one, hands-on approach to working with people. These personalized lessons explore learning through skilled manipulation and passive movements. Much of the learning takes place at the neurological level; as the nervous system receives sensory information, it establishes new connections in such a way that the student can easily expand his movement repertoire and relinquish his need for older, less efficient habits of movement. Sessions often take place on a firm Feldenkrais table or on the floor. However, they can also occur while the client is standing, sitting or engaging in an activity.

**Feldenkrais Professional Training**

Feldenkrais Professional Training programs are held throughout the world and follow international accreditation standards. Trainings last 160 days, spread over 3–4 years.

Teacher training is experientially based, beginning with immersion in the Feldenkrais group work, Awareness Through Movement. As the training progresses, this experiential foundation leads to the development of skills in movement observation, group teaching and the hands-on practice of Functional Integration. The training includes a wide variety of teaching modalities, including lecture, discussion, small-group constructive practices and many varieties of movement and awareness work.

Feldenkrais trainings attract people with a wide range of backgrounds. As Elizabeth Beringer, director of the Feldenkrais Institute of San Diego, says, “One of my greatest pleasures in
teaching trainings is the variety of students and the unique flavor of each group. Many people [enroll in] the training program because of the impact that the Method has had for them in their own healing, which ultimately inspires them to start a new career. They bring a wonderful spirit to the training programs. The training also attracts a wide range of health professionals who are looking to deepen their work, or looking for ways to work smarter with [fewer] injuries.”

Sample Lesson: Pelvic-Tilt Variations
The pelvic tilt is a common preparatory exercise taught in Pilates, yoga and mind-body fitness classes. This Awareness Through Movement lesson, which includes a segment on pelvic tilts, will give you a sense of the Feldenkrais Method’s approach and explore how shifts in your attention and intention can affect how force travels through you.

Introduction: Directing Attention
- Lie on your back with legs extended and arms down by your side, palms down. Take a moment to sense yourself.
- Direct your attention to your left heel. Feel where it makes contact with the floor. Sense the angle of the foot. How close are your toes to the floor?
- Explore the contact of the left calf. What is your sense of the calf resting on the floor? Where does it make the greatest contact? What is the shape of the contact?
- Bring your awareness to the upper left leg. Do you have a sense of the space behind your knee? What is your relationship like with the floor in this area?
- Now sense the left side of your pelvis. With your mind’s eye, begin to trace the length of your pelvis from top to bottom. Where does your pelvis end, and where does your lower back begin? What is the width of the left side of the pelvis? Begin to fill in the whole left side of the pelvis.
- Continue sensing up through the lower curve of the back. Feel those areas that transition away from the floor and toward the floor. Sense the ribs’ contact with the floor on the left side. Feel the left shoulder blade and the way the head rests on the floor.
- Pause and sense your entire left side. What is your sense of the length of the left side? How does your left side feel compared with your right side? Did directing your attention to one side have an effect?
Pelvic Tilts: Attention Affects Performance

Feldenkrais taught that “the gradual reduction of useless effort is necessary in order to increase kinesthetic sensitivity, without which a person cannot become self-regulating” (Feldenkrais 2010). The concept of gradual reduction in effort is an essential part of the Feldenkrais Method and is based on the Weber-Fechner law. This law asserts that the just noticeable difference in any sensation results from a change in the stimulus, which bears a constant ratio to the value of the stimulus. The law applies to sound, light and numerical cognition as well as kinesthetic sensitivity (Feldentrais 2010).

Begin by lying on your back with legs extended and arms down by your side, palms down. Bend your knees so that the soles of the feet are flat on the floor. Do each of the following movements several times, and with each movement see if you can reduce the effort and sense how the force moves through you:

• Bring all your attention to flattening your back into the floor so the pelvis is posteriorly tilted and then to arching your back away from the floor so the pelvis is anteriorly tilted. How does this movement affect the rest of your body? What is happening in your chest and neck?
• Now think about contracting your abdominal muscles to tilt your pelvis so that the lower back comes toward the floor and then contracting the back muscles to tilt your pelvis so the back moves away from the floor. How does the force move through you now?
• Begin to roll the pelvis toward your head and away from your head. See if you can feel the roundness of your pelvis as you move. Roll your pelvis away from the head and allow your entire spine to be gently pulled. As you roll your pelvis toward the head, let the movement come up through the spine.

These are three different ways of doing the same thing. What was different about each one in your experience? All are appropriate in different situations. But in this moment, which felt the most comfortable for you? Why?

Moshe Feldenkrais: Mind-Body Movement Pioneer

Moshe Feldenkrais, DSc (1904–1984), was a distinguished scientist, judo expert and educator. He earned his DSc in physics from the Sorbonne and worked as a research assistant under the Nobel Prize laureate Frédéric Joliot-Curie at the Curie Institute in Paris (IFF 2010; Reese 2004).
Feldenkrais developed a self-defense method that employed automatic response with modified jujitsu techniques (Feldenkrais 2010) at age 16 and went on to become a respected judo instructor and author of many books on the subject (Reese 2004). While fleeing from France to England to avoid the Nazi invasion, he suffered a severe knee injury that left him unable to walk. He worked on his own to heal his knee—exploring the relationship between bodily movement, states of consciousness, feeling, thinking and learning. He also studied the works of George Gurdjieff, F.M. Alexander, William Bates and Heinrich Jacoby (Reese 2004). As Feldenkrais began to deepen his understanding, he shared his discoveries through lectures, taught experimental classes and worked privately with some colleagues.

He returned to Israel in the 1950s and began teaching Awareness Through Movement classes and giving Functional Integration lessons full time. By the late 1950s he was presenting his work in Europe and the United States. Before his death in 1984, Feldenkrais authored several books on movement, learning, human consciousness and somatic experience. He personally trained a small group of practitioners in Israel and two groups in the United States to continue his work (Reese 2004; IFF 2010). Today there are thousands of Feldenkrais practitioners throughout the world (FGNA 2010; EuroTAB 2010).

Audio

To experience a sample Awareness Through Movement lesson, listen below. Courtesy of The Feldenkrais® Educational Foundation of North America.

SIDEBAR: Resources

Books by Moshe Feldenkrais


*Body and Mature Behavior: A Study in Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation and Learning* (Frog Books 2005)

*Body Awareness as Healing Therapy: The Case of Nora* (Frog Books 1993)


*Awareness Through Movement: Health Exercises for Personal Growth* (HarperOne 1991)

*The Master Moves* (Meta 1985)

*The Elusive Obvious* (Meta 1981)

Online Feldenkrais Resources


International Feldenkrais Federation, feldenkrais-method.org

Other Somatic Movement-Based Modalities


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My commitment to the study of and care for the human being dates back to 1994, when I first began my... moreless

References


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