



WHAT IS FELDENKRAIS?

by Susan Marshall

If you chose any of the responses to the right, you are correct! Moshe Feldenkrais, D.Sc. (1904-1984), developed the Feldenkrais Method® of Somatic Education. The method improves movement through gentle touch and guided movement. People often experience the method as healing. In a clinical or therapeutic setting, it is called neuromuscular re-education.

Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais and Development of the Feldenkrais Method

Dr. Feldenkrais shaped the Feldenkrais Method around two themes: survival and human development.

Feldenkrais was born in the Ukraine during a time of great persecution of young Jewish boys. At age 14, he left his birthplace to lead a group of adolescents on foot to Palestine. Fighting in self-defense for his own and his community's survival shaped his outlook on life. He taught self-defense tactics to Jewish settlers in Palestine before World War II and judo to the British Navy during the war. He also healed his own knee injury while working in a secret lab developing military projects for the allied war effort in Scotland during the war. The common element was developing keen awareness.

Choose one response. Feldenkrais is:

- a) a 20th century physicist, inventor, martial artist and author
- b) used to heal the body through gentle touch
- c) a somatic educational method used to improve movement
- d) neuromuscular re-education
- e) All of the above

Although Feldenkrais received his doctorate from the Sorbonne in physics, his real passion was applying the principles of physics to the human body. After World War II, Dr. Feldenkrais remained in London until the early 1950s, developing his ideas and writing books, some of which were only published posthumously in the 1980s.

He is known, along with Ida Rolf, as one of the two "somatic" visionaries of the last century. Somatics was a then new field that explored the mind body connection. Feldenkrais was also influenced by the great thinkers of the day: Freud, the father of psychology,

F.M. Alexander, founder of the Alexander Technique and Kano, the founder of judo.

Feldenkrais developed his method, trying out his movement ideas on himself as well as his friends. It was common to have a dinner party turn into an event in which he had the guests rolling around on the floor or involved in heated discussions on whether people learned more from pleasure than from pain.

In the 1950s, he returned to Israel. There he functioned as the personal trainer of David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel. His impact on the Prime Minister was evident from a famous picture of the 80-year-old statesman standing on his head on the beach at Tel Aviv in 1957. It was in Tel Aviv that Feldenkrais began giving planned lessons to group classes and developing a hands-on technique using this new method.

Feldenkrais presented lessons in two primary ways: Awareness Through Movement® lessons and Functional Integration® lessons. The goal of both types of lessons is to increase self-awareness leading to movement that is efficient and useful.

Awareness Through Movement lessons consisted of Dr. Feldenkrais verbally guiding students in a group

setting through movements, directing them to imagine, to interpret his verbal cues and to perform actions without prior demonstration. Dr. Feldenkrais was said to have catalogued over 20,000 movements in the human body and developed over 1,200 45-minute group Awareness Through Movement® lessons. He also gave Functional Integration lessons to individuals, on a low treatment table by moving the person's body with gentle, subtle, slow touch.

He trained Feldenkrais Practitioners in the United States and Israel only in the last 15 years of his life. In the 1970s, he founded the Feldenkrais Guild of North America to create standards and training programs for practitioners of the Feldenkrais Method. Although the Feldenkrais Method is very popular in Europe, the North American Guild is the world's largest of the 30-plus Feldenkrais practitioner guilds that exist today.

Feldenkrais Functional Integration Lessons

Today, most Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioners (GCFP) teach both Awareness Through Movement group classes and give individual Functional Integration lessons. While the group classes are more comparable as a cross between yoga and exercise classes, the experience of customized individual sessions is more indescribable, but highly effective.

Feldenkrais defined health as a dynamic ability to recover from shock, trauma, accident and illness. In movement, this means the body should be ready to go in any direction without prior preparation—the ultimate in flexibility and adaptation. Habits—specifically old “bad” habits—interfere with our ability to move efficiently.

As organisms interested in survival, we naturally strive for an economy of effort and motion. We adapt and shed non-useful habits. During a Function Integration lesson (as in life), we practice and adopt postural patterns according to the function we need to perform. So, if we want to throw a ball with more accuracy, we don't learn from being told what to do or reading it in a book. We learn

“Feldenkrais defined health as a dynamic ability to recover from shock, trauma, accident, and illness. In movement, this means the body should be ready to go in any direction without prior preparation—the ultimate in flexibility and adaptation.”

by doing, by activating our kinesthetic sense.

Our body learns most efficiently when the mind and body are quiet, the imagination is activated, and the movement is performed slowly. During a lesson, practitioners coach through verbal direction as well as physical touch. To spark awareness of the first inkling of motion, the practitioner “listens” through the neuromuscular system and then moves a person's bones and muscles gently through lines of force.

Doing less is more. Often after a Functional Integration lesson, students will be amazed that they feel so different or good. They will say, “But you hardly moved me!” This is because a change in the nervous system is more effective when the change is small. This is the opposite of “no pain, no gain.” Introducing a small change into the body's nervous system has greater longevity.

As the Feldenkrais practitioner guides movement, one discovers their body's movement preferences. The practitioner subtly introduces other movement options. Once the body becomes aware of the two different choices, the somatic intelligence of the body makes the better choice. As a result, we achieve better balance and agile coordination of the whole body. We experience a greater mechanical freedom as well as an organic unity.

In a therapeutic context, the work is referred to as neuromuscular re-education. This differs from massage in that there is a reprogramming

of muscles, rather than just relieving bodily tension. The practitioner “educates” the muscles and the nervous system so the body can make an informed choice. One or more lessons often result in a dramatic positive change to an old pain pattern.

Guided by the Feldenkrais practitioner, people also learn to recognize a continuum of improvement of movement, bit by bit, consciously and through trial and error. They shift from paying attention only to the end result to experiencing a child-like curiosity that brings them more in touch with the present.

Students report joy in the learning as well as pleasure in the movement! Bringing awareness, from a place that pain has been constant to a place where there is no pain, simply “feels good.”

Conclusion

The Feldenkrais Method of Somatic Education, as developed by Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais and practiced by Feldenkrais Practitioners throughout the world, can educate a person's body to improve their movement—and their life! As Feldenkrais would say, the Feldenkrais Method is about making impossible movements possible, possible movements easy, and easy movements elegant!

Susan Marshall, JD-MBA, ERYT, GCFP, is a Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner teaching one-on-one Functional Integration Lessons at the Feldenkrais Center of Portland. She works with clients who want better posture, less pain, greater range of joint motion, injury recovery and more. She also teaches yoga, meditation and Feldenkrais Method Awareness Through Movement classes in Portland. She is the former Executive Director of the Feldenkrais Guild of North America. Contact her at: Susan.Marshall@Feldenkraispx.com.

Feldenkrais®, The Feldenkrais Method® of Somatic Education, Awareness Through Movement®, ATM®, Functional Integration®, FI® are federally registered service marks of the Feldenkrais Guild of North America.