

Awareness Through Movement
The Feldenkrais Method
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On the origin

The Feldenkrais Method is the work of the Israeli physicist Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais (1904–1984). At the age of twenty-two he suffered a serious knee injury. At that time, medical doctors were not able to do much about it. Sometimes he experienced a lot of pain, sometimes hardly any, or none at all. He realized that there must be ways of moving that put less strain on his knee. He also became aware that he had very little awareness of how he actually moved. He began to experiment, to feel and to experience, which made him increasingly aware of his way of moving. At the same time, he noticed that he was more often and for longer periods free of complaints. And when he did experience pain, he knew what he could do to change it.

In 1949 he wrote *Body and Mature Behavior*, in which he described his insights on a neurophysiological basis. As a result of this book, various people came to him who thought he might be able to provide answers to their problems. Based on his own experience and theories, and while working with these people, he developed Functional Integration, the individual Feldenkrais lesson. Later, he added group movement lessons: Awareness Through Movement.

Some key points from Moshe's vision

- Body and mind are one. They are inseparably connected. This means that dysfunction on one level implies dysfunction of the whole person as an indivisible unity. Change on one level immediately leads to change on all other levels.
- Human beings use only a very small part of their potential capacity to learn. This means that, despite often hearing “That’s just the way I am,” you are capable of learning and changing until the day you die.
- Precisely because of our exceptional ability to learn, we can also easily learn inefficient patterns—or even patterns that work against ourselves. For example, always sitting with raised shoulders.
- Because we only have ourselves as a reference point to judge what is good and/or efficient, we are poor at recognizing our own inefficiency. For instance, you may consider your posture normal. Only when many people comment that you walk hunched over do you begin to doubt it. You do not really feel it yourself.
- Feldenkrais deliberately never spoke of therapy, treatment, therapist and/or patient, but of lessons and student. He emphasized that he does not teach you something, but that you teach yourself something with the help of the material offered.

Awareness Through Movement

A Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement lesson is a group class. As a participant, you are guided through verbal instructions to explore your movement patterns based on experiential learning—just as a child learns to move. Contact with the floor is used as a tool to perceive what you are actually doing. During the movements, you direct your attention to different parts of your body. You discover what moves along and what does not, you notice differences between one side and the other, and where movement is easy and where it is not.

You observe that through moving and sensing, the movements change and that you begin to move with more ease.

Feldenkrais is learning

To learn something, you need time, attention, and the ability to differentiate. This means that, in order to learn, you must increase your capacity to sense. When you lift an iron bar, you will not feel the difference if a fly lands on it or flies away. If, on the other hand, you hold a feather in your hand, you will certainly feel the difference when a fly lands on it. This principle applies to all of our senses.

In other words, the smaller the effort, the more sensitively you perceive an increase or decrease, allowing you to distinguish more accurately what is easier. The less effort, the greater your ability to learn new skills and the more sensitive you become during the learning process. That is why many movements are done lying down, minimizing the effect of gravity.

When your ability to differentiate has improved, you can better perceive what you are actually doing, rather than what you say you are doing or think you are doing.

Relaxation through movement?

The Feldenkrais Method is not a relaxation technique. However, many things change through the learning process, and relaxation is an important element within it.

At intervals, you pause and let everything rest in order to integrate what has been learned and to feel the changes in your body in relation to the floor. For example: heavier, lighter, longer, shorter, clearer, more spacious, weight more evenly distributed, and more relaxed.

Relaxation, however, is not the goal. What you work toward is making use of the possibilities you have as a human being and learning to trust your structure more and more. This means allowing yourself to be supported by your skeletal structure and releasing unnecessary muscular tension.

Breaking habitual patterns

The lessons often consist of simple movements. Each lesson introduces a new sequence of movements with its own learning objective. Usually, the movements are components of our automatic movements, such as turning to look behind you. While making the movements, you pay attention to what happens. By moving while lying down, your normal pattern of maintaining yourself against gravity is switched off. This allows you to step out of your habits and become more open to new possibilities. After just one lesson, you may already notice changes taking place within yourself.

Habitual patterns are naturally released when your body has experienced a better alternative. Thus, through learning by moving while lying down, you may notice that at the end of the lesson you stand differently, walk differently, and experience more ease in movement. And when you move differently, you may also notice simultaneous changes in how you feel and think.

Functional Integration

In individual lessons, Functional Integration, you are made aware—through the practitioner’s hands—of what you are doing. Essentially, it is the same process described above, but now mainly non-verbal.

The practitioner makes the movements for you and/or guides your movements with their hands. This allows you to sense parts of yourself that you would otherwise not perceive so easily.

On breathing

Within the Feldenkrais Method, there is no clearly defined “ideal” breathing technique. In fact, Moshe rejected all theories about how one should breathe.

He stated that breathing varies depending on what you are doing. As long as your breathing can adapt to your activity, any form of breathing is fine—even paradoxical breathing. In fact, this occurs frequently in nature; for example, when a cow moos or a lion roars, the volume of the abdomen increases during exhalation.

For good, efficient breathing, you therefore need multiple possibilities and should not depend on just one way of breathing.

To improve breathing, you first become aware of all its separate elements: the movements of the diaphragm, chest, and abdomen; sensing the space of the lungs and experiencing changes in volume during breathing; feeling the movements of all the small joints involved—between the sternum and ribs, between ribs and vertebrae, and between the shoulder girdle and the rib cage.

However, improvement in breathing only occurs once everyday postures become easier and allow for freer breathing.

So first you work on more ease in posture and movement. You then immediately notice more ease and space in your breathing. Essentially, you make your body more accessible to inhalation and exhalation, more yielding to the movement of breathing.

Written in the context of the theme day “*Breathing and Relaxation*”, organized by the Dutch Association for Physiotherapy and Relaxation, now the Dutch Association for Physiotherapy in Psychosomatics.

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