

The Feldenkrais Method[®] of Somatic Education

Move with ease.

BY SUSAN DAWSON-COOK, MS

Aching joints and a sore back following a workout or day at the mall may lead a person to ask, "Why does this happen to me?" Older adults tend to assume that physical discomfort is a normal part of aging and may become discouraged about their physical condition. In many cases, bodily pains are not related to age, illness or physical disability, but rather they are the result of inefficient movement patterns and repetitive trauma. Like a video in slow motion, the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education enables people to analyze their movement patterns, identify dysfunctional actions and adjust them for enhanced comfort and well being.

Naval officer, engineer and judo master, Moshé Pinhas Feldenkrais, first introduced these self-rehabilitation techniques in the United States in the 1950s. Suffering from a soccer-related knee injury incurred in 1929, his knee became worse in the 40s while working on a submarine. The rehabilitation techniques he developed freed him from pain and eventually led to his teaching classes in Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States. Appropriate for individuals of all ages and abilities, the Feldenkrais Method often attracts individuals with injuries or chronic pain, seeking to deepen their own consciousness or to heal emotional wounds.

THE MIND/BODY PRACTICE CONNECTION

Feldenkrais is considered a mind/body practice because it differs from the typical diagnose-then-treat model of traditional medicine. The Feldenkrais practitioner doesn't diagnose a problem or disease, but rather facilitates self-awareness in each participant. Through the relationship the practitioner establishes with the individual and the "kinesthetic conversation" they have during the lesson, students become more in tune with their bodies. Any improvements in symptomatic problems after movement re-education are often a side-effect of the students learning to move in a more graceful manner with less effort. Once people relearn how to stand, walk, run or cycle in a less traumatic manner, the mind/body connection facilitates improvements in other areas of life as well. Common benefits include improvements in sense of self, establishment of boundaries and the ability to listen, empathize, focus and manage stress.

Feldenkrais can be practiced in a group setting or in a one-on-one training format. Hundreds of lessons have been formulated by Feldenkrais that involve movement of everything from the eyes to the hip flexors. Awareness Through Movement[®] lessons are a series of structured movement sequences led by a practitioner in a group exercise setting. Group classes offer the opportunity for



participants to perform slow and minimal movements so they can become more mindful of unhealthy and inhibiting movement patterns. Through heightened body awareness, people relearn functional movements as well as sports-specific skills.

Functional Integration® is a one-on-one, hands-on version of Feldenkrais, where the instructor has the student perform a series of activities while lying on a table or sitting or standing. Props, such as pillows, rollers and blankets are used to support the body or facilitate certain movements. Over the course of the session, the practitioner communicates how a person organizes his or her body through gentle touch and small, slow movements. Customized to a person's particular interests and desires, Functional Integration typically produces results faster than group classes.

Feldenkrais can be used to prevent new injuries or to rehabilitate existing ones. When dysfunctional movements are done repeatedly and, in the case of athletic movements, with a lot of force, injuries occur. If no alteration is made to the movement pattern, the same injury may recur again and again. The key to fine-tuning movement is to "slow down and set up the neurological pattern first...then you can add speed," says David Taylor, MD, a guild-certified Feldenkrais practitioner at Miraval Life In Balance® Resort in Catalina, Ariz.

TEACHING TECHNIQUE

Teaching Feldenkrais is very different from teaching more traditional types of group movement classes. The class is not conducted to music and the variety of "routines" used is determined based on the students' needs. According to Dr. Taylor, who spent nearly 1000 hours attending lectures and discussions, watching videos of Dr. Feldenkrais working with various groups and individuals, and teaching Feldenkrais in both a one-on-one and group setting, the ideal instructor is empathetic and able to "sense, in a detailed way, what another person is experiencing moment by moment," including their self-image,

thoughts, emotions and intentions. Since participants learn to move their bodies by listening exclusively to verbal instructions, rather than modeling the movements of their instructor, precise verbal instructions are imperative for a successful class.

Bonnie Angelie, a certified Feldenkrais practitioner, has been practicing in Tucson, Ariz. for nearly 12 years. Her enthusiasm for Feldenkrais began when she took a class from Taylor and was subsequently able to remediate a persistent neck injury that had prevented her from turning her head. When it comes to movement patterns, Angelie believes that when you "improve an element of the system, the entire system improves."

For Angelie, teaching is all about flexibility and patience. When she notices students are unable to move a certain way, she changes her lesson plan. Because of the many available Feldenkrais lessons and themes, she can adapt quickly to her pupils' needs. Even a simple lesson such as rolling from the side to a prone or supine position can improve a person's ability to perform daily living tasks, such as getting up off the floor or getting out of bed.

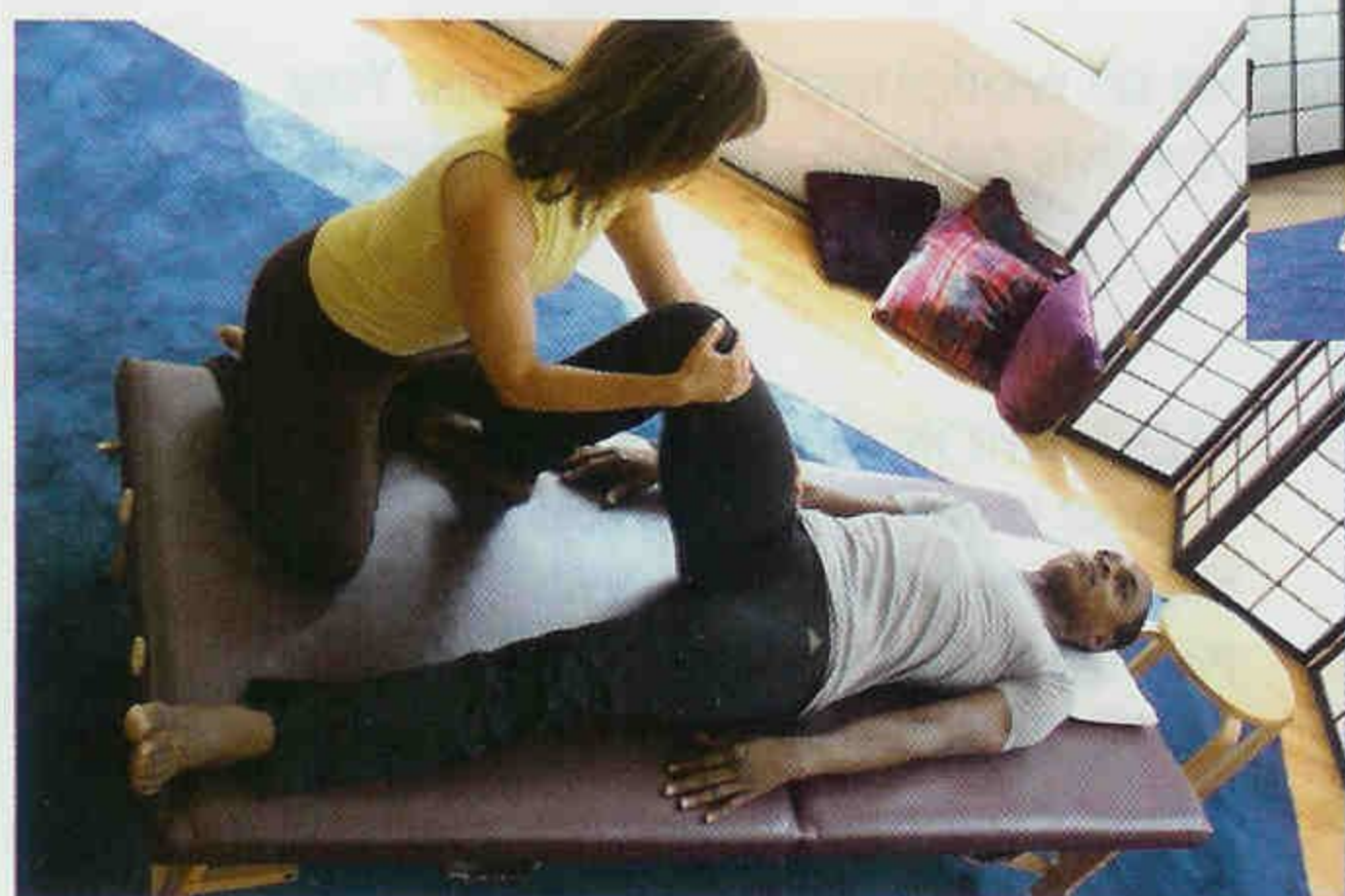
A PRACTICE THAT HEALS

Every Feldenkrais class provides a venue for self-discovery. A person may enter the class with a hypothesis about what is happening in his or her body and, through slow movement, data can be gathered and more possibilities and options become apparent. Through Feldenkrais, "people learn they have choices," Taylor says. They realize they can change what is happening with their bodies and with their lives. **AF**

Freelance writer **Susan Dawson-Cook** has an MS from the University of Arizona. She has been an AFAA certified fitness professional for more than 17 years. Dawson-Cook's passion for geology, health and fitness, and adventure travel serve as her inspiration for writing. She is currently writing a book about how her family's experience living in southern Peru changed her destiny.



PHOTOS BY ROSALIE O'CONNOR



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Books, workshops and audiotapes on Feldenkrais can be obtained at www.feldenkraisresources.com. A list of Feldenkrais practitioners in different cities can be found at www.feldenkrais.com/content/get_started/index/509#findpract