

HOW THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD WORKS

Awareness, Habits, Self-image, Somatic Learning & Acture

The human system has the flexibility to learn an infinite variety of actions--from gymnastics to brain surgery, from cooking to playing the piano, from speaking Swahili to speaking Cherokee. The subtle distinctions necessary to create these actions could only happen through years of apprenticeship of an individual in our species. There is a great deal to learn in order to live and mature in a human society, and we must learn quickly. This is as true today as it was one hundred thousand years ago, for us as individuals and as a species. In the remainder of this article, three important aspects of learning are implicit:

Opportunities for learning abound.

Patterns nested within patterns are the result of learning.

The ability to direct change through learning is a necessary skill for the survival of the individual, and for the survival of the species.

In order to understand how the Feldenkrais Method works, we need to explore a few abstract ideas and common themes, including awareness, habits, self-image, somatic learning, and acture.

Awareness:

The complexity of our nervous system is the result of our need to learn quickly in order to survive. In response to that need, our species evolved a highly developed ability. That ability is “**Awareness**”. Feldenkrais used the word “Awareness” very specifically. To him, it meant knowledge aligned with action. Simply put, **awareness is the ability to know HOW you are doing something WHILE you are doing it**. That sounds interesting, but you may be wondering, “How can ‘awareness’ help me in my daily life?”

When you are tense, injured, have a disease, or a central nervous system disorder; your movement becomes restricted and sometimes even painful. During these times, we unconsciously learn to limit our movement and overall functioning in order to protect ourselves. Often, we protect ourselves from moving a damaged or a seldom-used area. Thus a cycle of protecting ourselves leads us to limiting our movement even more. How to change the cycle is where Awareness is helpful. **When you find it difficult or painful to do what you want, or when you are learning or improving a skill, then the AWARENESS OF HOW YOU MOVE is very important.** Awareness is the first step in making our habitual choices conscious, and creates the possibility for change. Awareness of the way you are moving can lead you out of your

pain as well as a clearer understanding of yourself.

The practice of the Feldenkrais Method is an important aspect in the study of pain relief and functional restoration. Indeed, pain relief is very likely the main reason why most people seek this work, and why Dr. Feldenkrais started studying movement so intently. In “Awareness Through Movement” classes and private “Functional Integration” lessons, you become *aware* of your restricted movements and how these restrictions contribute to your difficulty or pain. Pain is not seen as an enemy, but as a warning signal from your nervous system. Pain is the signal from the body that something is amiss. Pain is tricky: **we need it and we don’t**. If ignored, it will lead to more difficulties. But pain relief is not the only intention of this work.

People with central nervous system disorders, such as multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, and attention deficit disorder, and people with neurological injuries, use this method to improve the way they move. Others study this method wanting to improve their movement for athletic skills or for the performing arts. Still others study this method for the pure enjoyment of moving with more freedom, flexibility, and grace. Everyone attends the same classes no matter what their movement capabilities or skill level. What is offered is so essential that everyone finds the improvement they are looking for, as the cantankerous Moshe himself use to say, “Whether they want to or not.” The relief of pain, and even the improvement of your movement, is by-products of your awareness. There are additional emotional and mental benefits of increasing your awareness, and they will be discussed later in this book. Next let’s talk about habits.

Habits:

Often we are not truly aware of how we move when we do something. We have an idea of what we would like to do (an intention), so we act. We learn from these actions and create habits (patterns) from what we have learned. We then act from habit, without much awareness or consideration of how we do things.

It is necessary to act from habits. If we didn’t form habits, we wouldn’t be able to tie our shoes in the morning, much less get to the coffee maker. Walking, breathing, carrying things, using our hands, talking, and even thinking are very complicated actions. The intricacy and relatedness of all habits and actions is never more evident than when we are learning a new skill, or when we find it difficult or painful to do what we want.

Many habits we learn initially provide stability in one-way or another. When we are injured, we create compensating habits that are temporarily useful, but often outlive their usefulness, and end up restricting our choices unnecessarily.

At these times, our habits can create problems. As the saying goes, “Yesterday’s solutions are today’s problems.” Habits that have outlived their effectiveness limit our general functioning. Learning to review habitual actions for their usefulness is necessary if we are to continue to develop and mature. To quote Dr. Feldenkrais:

We tend to stop learning when we have mastered sufficient skill to attain our immediate objective. Thus, for instance, we improve our speech until we can make ourselves understood. But any person who wishes to speak with the clarity of an actor discovers that he must study speech for several years in order to achieve anything approaching his maximum potential.... An intricate process of limiting ability accustoms [us] to make do with [a small part of] our potential.... (Awareness Through Movement, p. 15)

The Feldenkrais Method is concerned with:

**How we learn to do things,
The habits formed during learning, and
The alternatives inherent in our actions.**

Self-image:

Before you can move anything, whether it is the contents of a house, the Brooklyn Bridge, or your hand, you must have an image or perception of what you want to move: when you want to move yourself, that perception is your self-image. This "self-image" is not the image that I see when I look in the mirror. It is not the image that I present to others, such as--am I dressed appropriately to make a good impression on my job interview, or handsome enough to catch a mate? It is not my style, my reputation, nor my personality. It is not my self-esteem. It is not my ego. It is not the metaphorical or symbolic understanding of myself. All of these concepts of “self” are built on our self-image, therefore, all of these concepts of “self” change when we change our self-image.

In this discussion, self-image is a perception I present of myself to myself while moving. It is the neurological basis of “self”, and is necessary in order to move, think, feel, or sense. It is a sense of oneself produced through the entire brain, nervous system, and body. Our self-image (or self-perception) is not fixed, but is in constant flux. The malleability of our self-image is perhaps our species’ truest advantage. This flexibility enables the individual to learn many skills quickly, and to adapt to many environments and situations--allowing the individual and our species to survive.

Most of the time, this representation of “self” is left in the background of our awareness by necessity. If we were aware of it all times, we would not be able

to do much else. In **“Awareness Through Movement”** classes and **“Functional Integration”** lessons, we bring our self-image into the foreground of our awareness. We do this by slowing the pace of our movement, and appreciating the quality and effort of each movement. This *internal search* gives our central nervous system the time to correct any misperceptions we have of our self-image. We are aligning our self-perception more closely with reality. A somatic honesty is encouraged and developed.

Awareness of our movement leads us to an improved and refreshed self-image. And again, if our self-image changes--our experience of the world changes. We become more effective in our actions by learning to use our entire self-image in whatever we do. Indeed, through this process we learn to integrate our entire “self” into what we do. We are integrating our moving, thinking, sensing, and feeling. We feel “more present” because more of our self-image is present.

Surveying this landscape of our self-image is central to the Feldenkrais Method. Explicitly staking out the territory of the sensation of movement is one of Moshe’s greatest contributions to the understanding of ourselves. He believed that the physiological, psychological, and emotional changes from his work resulted from an essential change in one’s self-image. **Change the way you move, and you change the way you think, feel, and sense as well.**

The Feldenkrais Method is designed to assist people in becoming more aware of the way they move, so they can be more effective in their actions, more creative in their mental activities, and more comfortable within themselves emotionally.

Somatic Learning:

The basis of self-image is created while we are learning to move and creating movement patterns and habits as infants. We are “learning to learn” during the earliest stage of our development. As infants and children, we are learning to lift our heads, sit up, roll over, walk, and run. Learning these early motor skills creates the fundamental neurological pathways of our sensations, feelings, thoughts, and movements. We are learning to coordinate our actions in space, time, and gravity. We are growing our brain and developing our self-image. We are becoming aware. Our later actions are based on these early sensations, perceptions, and habits.

When we were young, we paid close attention to the sensation of our movement. **We were interested in the internal feeling of the quality of our movement.** If, during our explorations, we found a particular action required less effort, felt better and did what we intended, then we incorporated that action into a larger pattern. When we developed an *internal sensation* of

moving in an aesthetically pleasing and integrated manner, we felt pleased with ourselves. We were learning how less could be more.

In Feldenkrais's work, we look for the same quality or characteristic in choosing a movement. In a preferred movement, the internal sense is that the action is aesthetically pleasing to *us* and we still accomplish what we intend. Our intention is to improve our awareness. Movement is the specific focus, or what we attend to. **Intention and attention are allied.** This somatic learning requires introspection about the most primary function of life--the function of movement. To quote Feldenkrais, **“Movement is life. Without movement, life is impossible”**.

We often take our movement for granted because it seems simple, when actually it is very complicated. First, we have an intention to move--to act. Then, as mentioned before, we need an image of what we want to move. If we want to get anywhere or do anything, we must also understand the laws and forces governing our environment, including the objects, people, and the customs of our culture. As children, we are learning our movement habits, cultural habits and emotional habits together. **We are creating body and mind simultaneously.**

These childhood experiences are our first experiences with learning. We are literally “learning to learn”. It is a very important job. All children; black ones, brown ones, yellow ones, green ones, polka-dotted ones, striped ones, Germans, Mexicans, Chinese, and Africans, boys and girls, are preoccupied with learning to move. It is our first passion. It is truly human. Indeed, all of nature’s young, from coyotes to fledgling storks, are absorbed with learning to move. We call it play. It is a very complicated process: at times frustrating, at other times very rewarding. Play is learning to survive. Play is nature’s way of insuring that learning continues. Play = learning = survival.

Acture:

As an alternative to the word “posture” Feldenkrais coined the word “acture”. Posture is fixed or static. It describes the way you hold yourself. Acture describes the process of how you move. It is a dynamic description of systemic relationships. It is a more accurate term when describing the processes of movement, human development, maturation and evolution. It requires you to think of the process of your life as constantly changing, not fixed. How to best direct the changes is important knowledge when dealing with such fluid concepts.

This discussion of the abstract ideas of awareness, self-image, and somatic learning, as well as the professional jargon of “Functional Integration” and

“Awareness Through Movement” may leave you feeling a little dizzy. Here are a few questions to provide some firm ground to stand on in order to slow the spin down, or perhaps as a short cut to make it easier to find value in these diverse concepts.

Do you walk the same way when you are happy and confident as you do when you are extremely depressed or worried? Of course not. Your physiology is quite different in the two extremes. When you are depressed, your shoulders are drooping and forward, your head is tilted downward, and you walk as if you have the weight of the world on your shoulders. Your movement is heavy and labored. Yet, when you are happy, your head is held high, your shoulders back and there is a certain bounce to your step.

Would you walk the same way across a stage in a bathing suit with five thousand people watching, as you do when you walk outside in your bathrobe in the morning to get the paper? Is there more apprehension in your walk across the stage? Is there more ease in your walk to get the paper?

Would you putt differently in the Masters than when out for a friendly round of golf with your buddies? Does your sense of confidence affect your game?

Do others notice the sense you have of yourself through your posture and acture?

As mentioned earlier, the foundation of these responses to our environment is learned. They therefore can be unlearned or revised.