

# What is the *Feldenkrais Method*®?

Copyright 2013 © Nick Strauss-Klein • twincitiesfeldenkrais.com • nick@twincitiesfeldenkrais.com

## BACKGROUND

- The *Feldenkrais* (rhymes with “rice”) *Method* was invented almost 60 years ago by an Israeli physicist, engineer, and Judo master named Moshe Feldenkrais.
- It’s a form of neuromuscular reeducation. Think “brain/muscle learning.” This makes it coordination training (rather than strength, lengthening/stretching, or cardiovascular fitness training). So it’s not a replacement for traditional exercise, but it will improve your workouts dramatically as you’ll begin to enjoy and benefit from movement more and more.
- It’s used for a wide variety of applications because it has the capacity to improve any human function, but it is most often used to reduce pain, to improve day-to-day function or high performance activities (athletes/arts performers), to help children and adults with neurological or other developmental difficulties, and to develop sustainable and pleasurable movement habits as we age.
- It’s taught in two forms. *Awareness Through Movement*® (ATM) is the verbally-led modality taught in classes and at home from books, audio recordings, or memory and improvisation. *Functional Integration*® (FI) is done hands-on, fully-clothed, one-to-one, using a gentle non-invasive touch. The principles at work in both modalities are identical.
- Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984) found a way to retrain his brain and muscles and regained normal function of an injured knee without surgery after being told he might never walk again. He then studied human development, physiology, and neuropsychology and intuited that the primary learning language of the human brain is movement. 60+ years later modern neuroscience is just now proving this true, and our understanding of the phenomenal human capacity for neuroplasticity continues to grow.
- “*Movement is life. Life is a process. Improve the quality of the process and you improve the quality of life itself.*” -MF

## BIOMECHANICS

- We are designed to be upright, our bodies continually recentering plumb with the force of gravity like an upside-down pendulum, our skeleton doing most of the anti-gravity work, our muscles free to propel us in any direction without hesitation or preparation and available to create our actions in the world.
- When we deviate from this dynamic upright organization frequently and repetitively, we built habits of resisting gravity with muscles, ligaments, and other soft tissue that isn’t designed for the job. Posture-related injury and pain arise over the years. Injury is far more likely as we lose agility & flexibility.
- Since the large muscles of the body are then tied up resisting gravity unnecessarily, we begin to habitually overuse smaller muscles to do the things we do, even when they’re powerful movements that would be better served by the “core.” These fine muscles and delicate joints often become injured. A common example is that people with foot, knee, hip, shoulder, wrist, or neck pain are often rigid in the large muscles of the torso.
- This is one of the reasons breathing is so often a focus of our work. When we notice we’re holding our breath we’ve got a clear signal that we’re working too hard and we’re not supporting our actions fully from the torso or aligning our activity harmoniously with gravity.
- So we are seeking an upright dynamic posture, and movement and effort distributed evenly throughout ourselves whenever we act.
- We are seeking to use effort proportional to each of life’s activities. Very often we have trained ourselves to use far more force than we need for a given task, and we’re often not aware of the imbalance. That non-functional effort becomes shearing force in our joints and muscles, and through impact, friction, and heat it does damage to our soft tissue in the short term, and even our bones in the long term.
- Luckily, our damaged tissues have a tremendous ability to heal, though this capacity diminishes (but doesn’t disappear) as we age. This is why so many young people “get away with” habits that later cost them a lot of pain and suffering.
- With clarified biomechanical organization the cycle of repetitive damage can be interrupted, we can learn to move with more grace and ease as we were designed to, and over time our body structures heal and even improve.

## NEUROLOGY, LEARNING, AND IMPROVEMENT

*The physics principles above are relatively simple and basically inarguable, and we've been culturally conscious of many of them since Isaac Newton. So why don't we "know" them better in our personal biomechanics? Why do everyday actions hurt? Why couldn't we "stand up straight" when mom said to?*

- Because we haven't developed a mature ability to sense biomechanical physics at work in us. Our self image of what "standing up straight" is lacks detail. We're unaware of all the choices we have about how we stand or do anything else. *Feldenkrais Method* introduces detail and choice.
- With self preservation at its evolutionary roots, a human nervous system has three tasks: 1) to gather info about the environment, 2) to gather info about the self, 3) to have the curiosity to do so.
- Curiosity leads to finding, sensing, and making sense of different stimuli.
- Without curiosity, there is no development, maturing, or improving (let's say these equal learning).
- The *Feldenkrais Method* stimulates the learning process by creating an environment within which our natural curiosity is cultivated and oriented toward specific human functions on which action is built.
- Our attention is brought simply and quietly to explore our own movements and sensations without force, judgment, imposition, or willpower.
- Pleasures and pains are taken at face value as behavior modifiers. Safety and comfort are paramount.
- Differences are attended to and distinctions are made on a personal level. We are not told the "right way"; this would simply activate our willpower and skip the powerful self-discovery process that leads to self awareness, sustainable change, and a sense of agency and confidence (learning how to learn).
- Our nervous system senses fine differences best when the level of stimulation is small. Sensing these differences creates the most potent and lasting neuromuscular change appropriate to the individual, and it's why there's a strong emphasis on movement quality (light, easy, soft, slow, smooth) over quantity (we don't do many rote repetitions or use big ranges of motion very often).
- So to dispel a common misconception: *Feldenkrais*<sup>®</sup> lessons aren't gentle to be nice. They're gentle so they can work, and so that your attention won't be distracted by stretch, strain, or pain and thus diverted from the new, very refined sensations that will lead most rapidly to your improvement, short & long-term.
- Under these healthy learning conditions, our nervous system will spontaneously begin to approximate the improved biomechanical organizations that the lesson structures point to. This process becomes fascinating and pleasurable and self-reinforcing—in or out of a *Feldenkrais* lesson, consciously and unconsciously. Quality of life improvements will follow by necessity as awareness improves.
- Over time (even within one lesson) a new self awareness arises. (Awareness is simply a practiced and automatic attention.) Through awareness we begin to spontaneously move more efficiently, pleurably, and sustainably in the lesson movements and in our own activities.
- Eventually we can even consciously call up an easier image of self use when we notice we're in pain, straining, or frustrated in our activities. Self-confidence rises as we feel we are real agents of change for ourselves through improving our comfort and effectiveness in the world.
- Given the choice, our nervous system rewires to be able to choose simpler, more efficient self organizations in any activity. This capacity to change how we function is called neuroplasticity.
- Muscles are dumb, by the way. Nearly all of them only do what our brains tell them to do. It's just that much of the telling has become unaware habit. *Feldenkrais* reintroduces awareness & choice.
- Finally, we so often lie down to study because it reduces the load on the nervous system dramatically. Some studies show as much as 90% of our brain function is related to not falling when we're standing. By doing lessons in a non-habitual orientation to gravity we have a chance to address aspects of self that were far too locked into habitual postural work to uncover new options safely.
- Our self: brain, body, consciousness, spirit if you will...it's all operated by one nervous system. It functions as a whole at all times. We cannot separate out aspects or parts to "work on." Fascinatingly, as we effect change in any sphere of the self image (*Feldenkrais* said the self-image was composed of thinking, feeling, sensing, and acting), the others all change too. This leads to other applications of the method. Though movement is our "way in" and the primary language of the brain, *Feldenkrais* can lead to surprising psychological improvement. Many students come to stem anxiety or unlock their creativity.
- This is similarly true about different parts of our bodies. If you're here because your neck hurts, don't be too quick to tune out a lesson that seems to be about the feet. They're controlled by the same electric-powered nervous system and subject to the stresses of the same body acting in the physical world. You may be surprised when a "foot lesson" greatly helps your neck. Each lesson will relate the parts to each other and the whole, and often you'll be surprised by how and where you experience the improvement.