

A Healthy Me

(Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts)

by Tonia Moore / Consumer Health Interactive

WHAT IS THE FELDENKRAIS METHOD?

It's a therapy to reeducate the body so that you move with less discomfort and greater ease. If you're recovering from a strain or sprain, or if you have a condition that limits you physically, you may find it valuable.

The concept behind the method is basically this: Your body tends to fall into habitual ways of doing everything from looking down when you tie your shoes to shifting your weight as you stand grating cheese at the kitchen counter to picking up your cat. These ways of moving get the job done but typically call for far more strain than is necessary. You may not realize that you're unnecessarily tensing up certain parts of your body or that, in an effort to protect an injured area, you're putting undue stress on other areas. In Feldenkrais classes, the teacher's directions bring your awareness to the way you reach, turn, or bend, for instance, and enlighten you about other options -- perhaps a way to reach that lets your shoulder, back, and hips participate rather than overtaxing your elbow. Often, over the course of a class, you will integrate all the micromovements that go into one large motion so that it becomes smooth and almost effortless. In one-on-one sessions, your body absorbs a similar lesson through the gentle manipulations of a Feldenkrais practitioner.

WOULD FELDENKRAIS HELP ME?

That depends on what you're after. See whether one of the following applies

to you.

- If you have a chronic pain -- for example, recurring backaches, a knee that's never been the same since you twisted it skiing, an overuse injury like tennis elbow, or a constantly stiff neck -- some Feldenkrais sessions and classes could leave you feeling far fewer twinges and enjoying a greater range of motion.

If you have chronic headaches, the therapy may alleviate them.

If you recently injured yourself (maybe you twisted an ankle in aerobics class), Feldenkrais might let you get back in action much more quickly than if you simply rest.

If you've developed a repetitive stress injury, your body could learn to perform the vexing movement without aggravating the area.

If you have a physical problem or neurological disorder that makes it difficult for you to move in certain ways, the method is worth exploring.

If you're an athlete or a performer, Feldenkrais may put you in better touch with your body; it can deepen your understanding of how you tend to move, help you slip out of restricting patterns, and enhance your coordination and balance. Ultimately you may run, dance, shoot baskets, or play the violin with more facility and grace.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT IN AN INDIVIDUAL FELDENKRAIS SESSION?

Most people find Functional Integration sessions (as they're called by members of the Feldenkrais Guild of North America) pleasant and relaxing -- not quite as blissful as a massage but similarly restorative. You don't undress for this kind of body work, so wear clothing that doesn't restrict your movements; if you have time to change out of your work clothes, choose an outfit you might wear to a yoga class, like leggings and a T-shirt. Don't worry about shoes -- you'll be taking them off.

At your first one-on-one session, expect to spend some time filling the practitioner in about what you want to improve. If you have a chronic ache, try to describe it clearly, explaining when it bothers you, how long it's been going on, and what makes it feel better. The practitioner may want to watch you walk around the room for a minute or see how you stand up and sit down.

The session will last 45 minutes to an hour. You may sit or stand for it, but most commonly you'll lie down on a low padded table in the office. The practitioner will move your body in small ways, perhaps with a mere nudge to one hip, perhaps by picking up one of your limbs and rocking it back and forth. Nothing should hurt; the motions stay in the range your body allows. (Tell your practitioner right away if something feels bad.) Feel free to close your eyes and zone out. The tenet is that your body absorbs the information -- you don't need to consciously process it.

Afterward, your practitioner may want to watch you walk again or may ask you whether anything feels different and, if so, how. Don't expect one session to resolve the dull pain you've had in your shoulder since you were on the basketball team in junior high. But if you like the subtle changes you notice after that first experience, you may want to commit to a number of weekly or even semiweekly sessions. Ask your practitioner to estimate how many it would take to get you on track and see whether the answer strikes you as reasonable.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT IN A FELDENKRAIS CLASS?

Teachers certified by the Feldenkrais Guild call the approach used in their classes Awareness Through Movement, which gives you the basic idea. What differs from the one-on-one sessions is that you'll be moving your own body and focusing mentally on what you're doing. Wear loose clothing, and be ready to take off your shoes and lie or sit on a mat with a group of perhaps two to ten other people, depending on the space.

Even if you go back to the same teacher for several classes, each one will be a bit different. The teacher often will focus on a certain movement people use in everyday life, guiding you through small segments of it and having you try variations. For instance, you might be asked to lie on your back with your legs bent; the teacher might then tell you to lower your right leg to the side, then to lower both legs to that side, and then to draw other areas of your body -- like your abdomen or lower back -- into the movement. You may do a small move several times, concentrating on making it smooth and easy but never straining to do so. In between practicing an action like this, the teacher will have you rest for a few moments.

Toward the end of the class, the teacher will spend some time bringing your attention to ways in which your body feels different from how it did at the beginning of class. As with the individual sessions, the changes will likely be subtle. If you take more classes and become more mindful of how you move, however, you may find that you feel distinctly better on a daily basis.

Are there any dangers?

Not really. Feldenkrais is utterly gentle. If you play by its rules, you won't do anything that hurts. The only potential danger would be if someone with a serious condition chose to practice Feldenkrais to the exclusion of anything else, including effective medical treatments.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

Practitioners generally set their own rates; individual Functional Integration sessions range from about \$50 to \$90 (a more experienced practitioner will probably charge toward the high end of that range). If you find the cost prohibitive, try to find someone who charges on a sliding scale. Also, it's worth making a call to find out whether your health plan will cover any of the cost. Ask the Feldenkrais practitioner, too, whether he or she ever bills insurance plans directly; some practitioners are also physical therapists, which can make the process easier if you've been referred for physical therapy.

Classes are far more affordable, from about \$10 to \$25 a shot. Some teachers let you buy a series that brings down the price per class. If your budget doesn't allow for more than one or two individual sessions, you may still benefit considerably from taking the classes. Another good way to supplement sessions or classes is by using videotapes at home. The Feldenkrais Guild of North America

has an online catalog of videos as well as audiocassettes and books; to check out the offerings, go to <http://www.feldenkrais.com/catalog/index.html>.

HOW DO I FIND A PRACTITIONER?

The Feldenkrais Guild of North America has a directory that you can use to locate someone in your area. Or if you know anyone who's tried the method, see whether that person can give you a recommendation. Be sure to verify that any practitioner you choose has gone through an accredited Feldenkrais training program.

However you get a practitioner's name and number, spend some time explaining your concerns when you first give him or her a call. If the practitioner doesn't seem to listen or fails to set you at ease, keep looking.

HOW OFTEN DO I NEED TO TAKE CLASSES OR HAVE INDIVIDUAL SESSIONS TO BENEFIT?

The answer depends on many things -- whether you have an injury or a chronic condition, how long you've been in pain or stuck in certain patterns of movement, what your goals are, how willing you are to practice simple exercises on your own. An uncomplicated concern like a mildly strained muscle might be resolved in just a couple of Feldenkrais sessions paired with a well-designed injury recovery plan. Something more serious or ingrained will take longer, and even when you're better, you might want to have an occasional session to "remind" your body of the pleasantly free ways it has learned to move. If you're unsure about whether your condition is one that might improve through Feldenkrais practice, consult your doctor.

-- Freelance writer and editor Tonia Moore is a former senior editor at Consumer Health Interactive. She

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