

MOVEMENT 101: The Feldenkrais Method Helps People Relearn How to Move

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By Jennifer Garrett

Suzanne Michler used to fall -- a lot. The Madison native stumbled on Highland Avenue, chipping one tooth and loosening three others. During a hike in Scotland, her husband caught her as she slipped toward a deep crevasse. Michler says she wasn't sick -- just clumsy -- and she had been that way all her life.

Now in her 60s, Michler says the falls became more troublesome and the resulting injuries more severe as she grew older. After her scare in Scotland, Michler asked a chiropractor what to do. He suggested the Feldenkrais Method.

Michler tried it and, much to her surprise, it worked. She no longer trips or loses her balance. She has more energy, grace and confidence. She even took up basketball -- something she says she couldn't have done in high school. "I'm having an absolutely incredible experience," Michler says. "Of all the things I have done in my life to promote my well-being, and I've done a lot of things, this is probably right at the top." So what is Feldenkrais? A magic elixir? A new religion? The next exercise fad? It's none of the above, according to Madison-based practitioner Denise Duranczyk. Feldenkrais (pronounced fel-den-krice), she says, is "a re-education technique. People are learning how they are moving so they can change what they are doing."

The method was developed by Moshe Feldenkrais, a Russian-born physicist,

engineer and judo expert. Feldenkrais sustained a series of crippling knee injuries and decided to place his future wellness quite literally in his own hands. Through study and experimentation on his own body, Feldenkrais developed his namesake method of somatic education, or learning through movement.

It's old news for dancers, athletes and musicians who have been using Feldenkrais for years to improve extension, agility and dexterity. Individuals with chronic pain have also found their way to Feldenkrais classes and sessions.

Now Feldenkrais is ready to go mainstream. It's already popular on the coasts, with classes offered in various New York and San Francisco health clubs. Feldenkrais is less familiar in Wisconsin, although Milwaukee and Madison both have had practitioners in residence for the past dozen years.

Patty Holman, a Milwaukee-based Feldenkrais practitioner, is glad to see the growing interest. Holman says Feldenkrais can do wonders for anyone, not just those who use their bodies professionally or who suffer debilitating pain. "We are movement creatures," Holman says. "We don't walk around as brains without bodies. We walk around in bodies and we experience the world through our bodies. I say, let that be a pleasurable experience."

The Feldenkrais experience takes one of two forms. Awareness Through Movement is a class-based program similar in style and clientele to yoga. People show up in loose-fitting clothing, bringing along body-sized

mats for floor work. The pace is slow, the room quiet. Feldenkrais, like yoga, requires individuals to think about their movements as they make them, emphasizing the ability to control our bodies (and the way we feel) with our minds.

Yet while yoga works through static postures, Feldenkrais works through dynamic movements. Yoga bends the body in new and unusual ways; Feldenkrais movements stem from everyday activities like walking, reaching or sitting. Where yoga is considered exercise and involves stretching through discomfort, Feldenkrais is the anti-exercise. The goal is to expend the least amount of energy with every movement and to avoid any movements that are uncomfortable.

The other option is Functional Integration, which involves hands-on, one-on-one sessions with a Feldenkrais practitioner. Practitioners are quick to point out that Feldenkrais is neither massage nor bodywork. There is no kneading or working of the flesh. Nor is it medicine, although Holman says it can be very therapeutic. It is, Holman says, true education. Some practitioners even refer to themselves as teachers and their clients as students.

Both practitioners and clients agree that Feldenkrais work is interactive. A person doesn't just show up for an hour and feel better afterward. "To be a good student, you have to be engaged in the process," says Duranczyk. "You can't just lie there on the table."

In either the class or the individual setting, the practitioner will ask a lot of questions. Which of your legs feels

longer? Where does your leg begin? Which way is it easier to turn your head? Which parts of your body feel the heaviest? Which way does your pelvis move when you lift your heel off the floor?

Along with verbal cues, practitioners will use gentle touch (the latter used more so during Functional Integration than in Awareness through Movement) to guide students through the sessions.

The movements themselves are minute. Someone watching probably wouldn't notice that all of the people on the floor are slightly tilting their pelvises up and down. Observers might think the motion in outstretched arms is muscle twitching and not deliberate, half-dollar sized circles.

Evelyn Thompson of Fitchburg says the miniscule movements take some getting used to. "The first little bit really didn't thrill me. Lying on the floor and moving parts of yourself a half an inch or an inch is not something you're accustomed to. It was strange," she says.

Duranczyk understands the initial hesitancy about Feldenkrais. "Doing less to many people in this culture is counter-intuitive. People think they need to work harder to improve. Working smarter and not harder is really the key."

Feldenkrais is not a replacement for cardiovascular exercise, but Duranczyk says it can make that 20 minutes on the treadmill easier, or it might enable someone to run an extra mile without a lot of extra exertion. That's because Feldenkrais eliminates inefficiencies in ordinary movements, like walking, sitting, reaching or running, so that we have more energy left over for other physical activities we'd like to do. "A lot of people don't understand that they are using all of this effort that they don't have to use. They can reduce the effort by 50 or 75 percent and still accomplish the same movement, but then they'd have more

energy."

"Movement 101" Milwaukee State Journal Page 3 of 3 Sandra Rae River, another Madison-area practitioner, says Feldenkrais is designed to enable students to better understand the movements they are making. She explains that many of our activities are so guided by habit that we no longer think about them. Most of us don't pay much attention to how we rise from the couch, reach for the cereal box or sit at our desks.

"If we can learn to be more aware of what we do, how it feels when we do it, how it works when we do it, and we can slow down enough and pay attention to what we're doing, we can change the movement patterns." Then, River says, "we have new choices."

Thompson says Feldenkrais helped her recognize and change some unhealthy habits. "I hunch my shoulders when I'm nervous. That just wastes a lot of energy," she says. "And it makes my shoulders ache after a while. It's interesting, too, finding out that if I tense my hands, other parts of my body will tense up. I didn't notice that before."

Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis more than 20 years ago, Thompson had attributed some pain and movement difficulty to her disease. "I thought MS was creeping up on me."

Thompson changed her mind when she started doing Feldenkrais. She was surprised to learn how much her own behavior affected how she felt. "One of the things I became aware of was there are certainly discomforts I am having that have nothing to do with MS, and those I do have control over," she says. "It made me really look for those things so I could do something about them. A lot of my pain went away."

What was most startling for Thompson about her Feldenkrais discoveries was how easy it was. "This is so simple. All you have to do is show up and do it and your body is going to feel better."

And who couldn't stand to feel better? River says no one. She thinks people are wrong to "assume that it's just a part of growing old or a normal part of living to put up with some pain or some limitations. We don't need to give up or slow down. We can do the things we want."

River adds that attitude is critical. "If you keep thinking my body isn't capable of that, that is going to be self-limiting. If you open yourself to possibility and experiment within that range of possibility, you would be amazed at what you're capable of. Feldenkrais is about being able to do what you want."

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