

New hope for aching, creaky yuppie bodies



by Dr. Norman Doidge for
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Anyone who is subject to the Agrim tug of gravity might count themselves lucky that one day, about 50 years ago, Moshe Feldenkrais, in his late thirties, while standing on a wet submarine deck, slipped and aggravated an old knee injury. They should also be grateful to the doctors who told him he would never walk again without surgery (surgery that offered only a 50% cure rate), because Feldenkrais decided to fix himself, and invented a new treatment in the process.

Feldenkrais was a remarkable man and a genius. Born in 1904 in Russia, he fled pogroms to pre-state Israel when he was 14. At the time, the British Mandate prohibited Jews, but not Arabs, from carrying arms, so Feldenkrais trained himself in unarmed combat, then tutored others.

With the money he made tutoring he went to Paris where he trained as a mechanical and electrical engineer. He then became a physicist, working and co-authoring papers with Frederic Joliot-Curie (who with his wife received the Nobel Prize in 1938). Feldenkrais, in the meantime, became one of Europe's first black belts in judo, and set up the Jiu-Jitso Club de France with the founder of modern judo, Jigoro Kano.

Feldenkrais and Joliot-Curie were working on the French atomic-research program when the Nazis invaded Paris. Joliot-Curie knew Feldenkrais would be arrested as a Jew, so he arranged for him to escape to London – with two suitcases full of the French atomic secrets, thereby keeping them out of Nazi hands. Through the intervention of the British scientist J.D. Bernal, he worked for the British anti-submarine program.

Feldenkrais also led the training of British paratroopers in hand-to-hand combat. After the war, he completed his doctorate in physics at the Sorbonne. When the State of Israel was created he became director of the electronics department for the Israeli Ministry of Defense, and wrote the book on hand-to-hand combat for the Israeli army. He now spoke Russian, Hebrew, French, German and English.

But back to the bum knee. Feldenkrais used his incredible scientific mind, extraordinary observational skills, and his expertise in judo to determine what made his knee better or worse. His new treatment was based not just on the understanding of individual joints, muscles, and ligaments, but on the role of awareness in movement and body mechanics.

Animals have an enviable grace, and so do babies and young children, but that grace is often lost as we age, thought Feldenkrais, not because we age, but because we learn bad habits. These include postures which have emerged to protect injuries, but which now add chronic bodily insult to injury. Feldenkrais taught limping people to walk by first teaching them to crawl like babies.

The method can be used for a variety of conditions – back, neck, head and jaw pain, problems due to artificial hips and knees, fused spines, and arthritic conditions. It is useful to anyone who has to sit at a computer all day, or for those who have to be particularly physically active or aware, including athletes, soldiers, surgeons and actors.

Many musicians in New York have a Feldenkrais practitioner. Yehudi Menuin swore by Feldenkrais, and so does Yo-Yo Ma. The director of the Royal

Shakespeare Theatre, Peter Brook, was a major fan as were anthropologist Margaret Mead and neurophysiologist Dr. Karl Pribram, who thought Feldenkrais in tune with the most advanced knowledge we have of the brain. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, sought out Feldenkrais when he was 75 years old and could barely stand in Parliament because of his serious back problem. After treatment, "the old man" could leap onto tanks and stand on his head.

Feldenkrais eventually used his approach in extreme cases, helping people with strokes learn how to read, speak, and walk again, or for treating people with cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis.

Many well-known treatments for musculoskeletal pain treat the problem locally, by strengthening the affected area (physiotherapy), using surgery, or twisting the spine with force (chiropractics). Feldenkrais' method focuses on general functioning. Regardless of the cause – an aching back, artificial joint, arthritis, or tension – Feldenkrais assigns exercises to make his pupils aware of movement. "Errors" of movement are not "corrected." Rather, lack of flow is noticed. Then, in the low stimulus environment, barely detectable movements are prescribed. These minute changes induce the nervous system to lower the general tone of muscular contraction, so the sufferer can become consciously aware of the unconscious movement patterns that exacerbate or cause the problem.

Watching and listening to lithesome Marion Harris, who trained with Feldenkrais, conducting classes at The Feldenkrais Centre in Toronto, I was amazed to see how many of the concepts are similar to those used in psychotherapy done properly – which is patiently. Feldenkrais knew, as did Sherrington, the great neurologist, that most of the brain's activity is inhibitory: it stops, retards or modifies the actions of our more flowing primitive animal brain. Most bad habits include jerky inhibitory compensations or vestigial "defenses" that once protected an injury,

but now are locked in. Instead of attacking bad postural habits directly (which often only makes them get worse), the master practitioner finds ingenious ways to release the bad habits.

For instance, new non-habitual ways of moving are introduced, to confuse the current pattern. People with bad posture secondary to knee problems might be asked to walk backwards for a bit, both to scramble the bad habit, and because bad compensations haven't yet attached themselves to backward walking. Then, having experienced what it is like to walk without bad posture, they relearn walking forward, spontaneously, in a re-organized, nimble way, so they don't hurt their tender knees. The aim is always to move without wasted energy or willpower. Often, at the end of a class, muscles have softened, eyes are more open, breathing is deeper and pain has decreased. People may stand an inch taller.

Feldenkrais also conducted one-on-one sessions, called Functional Integration, where he used his hands to diagnose movement problems, and then gently moved people's limbs, necks, and heads, teaching a suppleness that could be generalized to all movements.

Feldenkrais died in 1984, but his work is spreading, especially in Europe. There are too few Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioners in Canada, but they are spread from Vancouver Island to Newfoundland, and there is a Feldenkrais clinic in the Ottawa General Hospital. Qualified practitioners who are members of the Feldenkrais Guild can be contacted by calling 1-800-775-2118.

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