As human beings, we develop through movement. But, once we are more or less functioning, we go on to other “important” stuff. We do not realize how much more room there is for improvement.

Through Feldenkrais Method lessons, we can give people the possibility, once again, to experiment with movement in a safe way, without prejudice, judgment nor competition, just to continue the learning from where it left off, and continue to polish it—and it can work wonders!

Here are two stories.

A woman in her mid-seventies came to see me because everything was difficult for her; she was feeling heavy and had no energy. In her first group class (Awareness Through Movement®), she said she would at least like to be able to roll over in bed, to her sides, and from the back to the stomach, without waking up because of the effort. There were five other women between 70 and 87 years of age in the class as well, so we did a lesson exploring this question.

First, I asked the group to turn as they always did. It was fun to see how many ways there were to do the same function, and not all were easy. Then we slowly started integrating the foot as motor to the movement; played with trying to bring the roll from the foot, and then from the pelvis. They discovered what to do with the ribs, the arms, the head, and the eyes.

I invited them to repeat the original rolling movement and say how they felt. This woman was astonished. “I did not know it was this easy. I went to the floor feeling like a hippopotamus, and came up like a ballerina. Now I understand…I hope I still remember it tonight,” she said laughing. What we all shared was a feeling of well being and joy. They now could feel more comfortable in bed.

I gave a Functional Integration® lesson to another woman (77 years of age). She had experienced medical death while undergoing heart bypass surgery. That was almost a year ago. The only thing that still bothers her is a tremor in her hands when she tries, for example, to open a zipper, cook, or put on her shoes. This trembling was the result of the surgery. We worked in a sitting position, because she gets dizzy lying down. We slowly explored the possibilities for movement in the ribs, as I listened to her stories. Afterwards, I told her to open and close her zipper. She succeeded in two tries. She was so happy that she insisted on putting her coat alone for the first time in six weeks.

Flexibility has a lot to do with self confidence—knowing one can learn something further. One’s actions can stop being governed by chance and habit. Feldenkrais Method lessons can help one learn to understand what one is doing so that actions are repeated by choice, not compulsion. Society expects one to know all the answers. It is very relaxing to know that one does not have to know, instead one has the possibility to relearn, and to experiment through trial and error.

The Feldenkrais Method is not only about physical flexibility, but about giving dignity back. The quality of the everyday life of these women changed. We are not satisfied with just getting “it,” we can always improve what we already know and make it easier, more flexible, and continue to move toward improvement.

—by Diana Sternbach, GCFT
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Choose Flexibility

Flexibility! When we think of flexibility, usually we think of a ballerina, a gymnast, or perhaps a martial artist doing a high kick. Certainly this is an important aspect of flexibility, and we address this extensively in the Feldenkrais Method.

However, Moshe Feldenkrais once stated that he wanted “Flexible minds, not flexible bodies,” and that the object of his Method was to learn how to learn, both in movement and in meeting the challenges of life. How did he think that a method of movement education could accomplish this?

In the movement explorations of the Feldenkrais Method, we learn to create choices in movement, to sense how we perform our actions, and to observe our results. This is different from the way many of us go through stressed and hurried lives during which we may not always take time to be aware of our sensations, consider other alternatives, or observe our outcomes. The simple act of slowing down to observe and consider, which is essential to our Method, can dramatically change one’s life.

An important concept, which we use extensively, is the idea of choices. Feldenkrais applied this concept everywhere; much of his Method involved creating learning situations for people to discover new possibilities of movement, from which they could make new choices. A single course of action constituted no choice; two courses of action constituted a primitive choice. Only when three or more courses of action were considered could there be a reasonable probability of an intelligent choice. He recommended making a practice of considering choices before we act, even in simple acts such as choosing a hand to hold the toothbrush or planning a route to go to work.

Feldenkrais applied this concept everywhere; much of his Method involved teaching people choices of movement patterns. But, more important to this discussion, he believed in viewing a problem from multiple perspectives. One day he spoke to his class about what a wonderful philanthropist Andrew Carnegie was. The next day he amazed the class by an equally convincing argument that Andrew Carnegie was a robber baron. He would often take the opposite side of an argument from a student, convince the student to change his or her mind, and then suddenly switch to an equally convincing argument for the other side! He felt that one did not adequately understand an issue unless one could convincingly debate it from either side.

Just for fun, try this experiment. The next time you feel that you are stuck in any way, limited in possibilities, or simply don’t have a choice—stop. Don’t act yet, unless it is an emergency. Get a piece of paper and a pen. Start brainstorming about the possibilities. Let yourself be wild and imaginative; you can discard the unfeasible ideas later. See if you can come up with three or more ways of handling the situation. Opening your mind to this process is likely to bring some workable solutions to mind, along with the ridiculous.

Another experiment is to play with perspectives. When faced with a decision, consider the problem from several viewpoints. If you are in a conflict with someone else, be sure to include his or her perspective. Does this change your thinking?

Enjoy these experiments, and come to an Awareness Through Movement class or go to a Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner to see how we apply these concepts to the study of efficient and pain-free movement.

—by Ann Harman, GCFT. Contact her at: <afn29901@afn.org>

Moshe Feldenkrais Centennial

“Development stresses the harmonious coordination between structure, function, and achievement.”

Moshe Feldenkrais 1904 — 1984
Traveling can cause stiffness and discomfort for many of us. The following small Awareness Through Movement sequence can help passengers maintain flexibility—whether on an airplane or in a car.

If it's comfortable, slide forward a bit in your seat, so that your back is away from your seat back and your feet are flat on the floor. Adjust your seat belt if necessary. Make sure your seat back is in an upright position. Sense the weight of your sitting bones sinking into the seat. You can feel them by putting your hand on one or both sides of the bottom of your pelvis and pressing down into your hand. Notice each side. Is one side heavier than the other? Do they feel straight across from each other? Or is one more forward or back than the other? Don't worry about trying to correct it. Just notice. If your hands are underneath you, remove them and rest them comfortably in your lap. Shift your weight over to your right sitting bone and then return.

Repeat this movement several times. Does your torso tilt over to the right as if it was a stick, or does your trunk stay in the center, while your pelvis moves underneath you? Can you feel your feet on the floor? Do you feel any shifting of weight in your feet? Can you do this movement without lifting your heels off the floor? If you don’t feel anything, that's OK, these sensations are subtle and when you're feeling stiff, sometimes they're not as obvious. Turn your attention to your ribs. Are they moving, or still?

Now let it go and just rest. You can rest by leaning back in your seat if you wish. Return to the position where your feet are flat on the floor. Try shifting your pelvis over towards the left sitting bone. Shift to the left and back to neutral several times. Keep it light, make it an exploration. Does it feel different on this side? Easier? More difficult?

Let the movement go and rest, leaning back in your seat if you wish. Come forward on your seat again. Begin to rock your pelvis back a little. It doesn’t have to be a big movement at all. Tilting your pelvis back kind of feels like you’re schlumping over. It's what so many of us do when our backs are tired after sitting at a computer all day. The bottom of your tailbone moves a little forward and your lower back rounds a bit. Pull your abdomen in towards your spine, not as if you were doing crunches, but as if you wanted to press your belly to your back. This will help round the lower back.

Now rock the other way. When you tilt your pelvis forward it means that your lower back arches a bit and your tailbone goes a bit backward. You might want to expand your abdomen a bit in this direction. Even though we've been taught that you're always supposed to hold your stomach in, the truth is that at times, intentionally pushing out your abdomen can provide greater power and flexibility.

Begin to alternate, tilt your pelvis forward and back several times. As you round your back, you can raise your heels off the floor if you wish, increasing the tilt in your pelvis if it's comfortable. As you raise your heels, it's easier for your pelvis to tilt backwards. Notice your breathing—do you inhale, exhale, or hold your breath as you tilt? Try varying how you breathe and see if it makes a difference as you tilt your pelvis. As you continue doing the movement, do you notice any change in the shape of your upper back? Does it stay straight, or does it want to round and arch somewhere? What does your head want to do? Is it looking straight ahead? Do you want to look down towards your navel? Do you want to look up? Try each way and see if there is one direction that feels better than the others. Then let it go and rest.

Come forward in your chair again. This time as you move your pelvis forward, intentionally let your head look up a little. As you return your pelvis to neutral, bring your head back to neutral. As you round, intentionally lower your head to look at your navel. Try this movement several times. Remember to keep it small. See if you can tune in to what's taking place between your pelvis and head. You might feel your back arching and rounding a bit. Or you might feel that the front of you is expanding and collapsing—or both as the same time.

Take a rest. As you are relaxing, just take note of how it feels to sit in your seat right now. Has anything changed? ●●

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