SENSEABILITY

Balance

Finding Independence by Diane Fecteau, GCFP

Watch a child standing by herself the first time. Her joy is apparent; her pride knows no bounds. Triumphant over gravity, she takes her first steps toward independence.

As we age, we take our balance for granted. But perhaps one day we do something simple—stand on our tiptoes to reach or take a step—and we feel unstable. Maybe there’s a sensation of spinning or whirling—what doctors call vertigo. Perhaps there’s a sense of turning. Worse, we may fall.

Carol, a 60-year old widow, was referred to me by her doctor. She had begun feeling “dizzy,” and had fallen a half dozen times. Her doctor’s numerous tests had found no reason for her falling. While she had thus far avoided serious injury, her doctor was concerned. Carol now hesitated to walk alone to her mailbox. She feared she would fall and nobody would be there to help her up. She was afraid of the stairs in her three-story townhouse. Her world was becoming smaller. She was losing her independence.

When Carol arrived at my office for her first appointment, she walked slowly, bending forward, and reaching out to a door or wall to steady herself. When we walk like this it prevents our pelvis, hip joints, spine, and shoulders from moving freely. Our weight can’t easily shift from heels to toes as we step forward. It makes it impossible to read the cues the body sends regarding balance—cues from our ankles, hip joints, and neck. It becomes easier to fall. But the fear of falling, a primal one, had resulted in her becoming tense and constricted. She was taking no chances.

Carol and I worked together for several weeks. The Functional Integration lessons involved connecting her head to her pelvis, using her four points—both hands and both feet—to explore losing and regaining equilibrium, coordinating between right and left, shifting weight, and rolling. Her awareness of where she was in space improved.

After five weeks she reported she had not fallen since the first week we began working together. I then shared the following lesson with her. Standing, I asked her to pat her belly just below the belly button. I asked her to imagine this entire area—side-to-side and front to back—as a huge blue balloon. She then imagined the balloon floating forward as she floated forward. Then she imagined it floating backward and she floated backward. The balloon, floating through space, carried her around my office. Her legs stayed soft and responsive; her arms were relaxed at her sides. Gliding through space, she looked very different from the lady who had crept slowly into my office. Gone were the constricting habits. She had lost her fear of walking.

Carol, like many of my clients with balance problems, discovered that balance can improve. Through the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education, she found a safe way to explore her relationship with the space around her and the ground beneath her. Learning just as she did when she was a child, she regained her independence.
Falling With Ease and Flexibility, Landing With Freedom and Softness
—by Mary Susan Chen, GCFP

"Oh no! I'll miss Melissa's first communion! I've never broken a bone before. Now at my age, I'll be in a cast!"

All of this flashed through my mind in the split second of being in mid-air after slipping out of the shower. I had been in a hurry and hadn't placed the bath mat on the floor. I landed on my backside and paused, waiting for the intense pain of a broken tailbone, wrist, lower leg, or back. To my surprise, I felt nothing! I regained my breath and carefully got up on my feet. I could hardly believe my good fortune. I wasn't hurt. I didn't feel bruised. Nothing was twisted, nothing sprained.

Surely the pain would come soon. Surely I would find a bruise later or begin to hurt sometime during the first communion mass. Instead I spent the whole day celebrating with my family. I barely even thought about the fall, except to wonder, "How did I get so lucky? I was sure I was heading for the ER."

Later, thinking back on my fall, I realized I'd heard this story before. My Feldenkrais® students have reported almost identical incidents. And each time, they told the story in disbelief.

Dominic came to me to smooth out his violin playing. He had recently joined a trio and wanted to improve the quality of his performance. He came to the office for private Functional Integration lessons. Then, during a summer trip to Cape Cod, he was descending the narrow winding cast-iron staircase of an old train car converted into a restaurant. His young daughter was with him and he was worried she might fall.

All of a sudden Dominic tumbled the whole length of the staircase. Everyone in the restaurant jumped out of their seats to help, ready to call the paramedics. Surprisingly, Dominic came right to his feet, brushed himself off, smiled and went about his evening. The other diners were shocked. Even Dominic was looking for the bruises later that week.

"How was I not injured? It's got to be the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education." Dominic knew he was able to respond to life more spontaneously, thus able to roll with the fall and not tighten up and resist.

Sheila had been attending Awareness Through Movement classes for about six months. One night in January, she announced that she had almost NOT made it to class that evening. She calmly told the story of her icy back steps, losing her balance as she exited the house, landing flat on her rump, ready to scream for help, praying that a neighbor would hear. However, as she lay on the ice, she realized that indeed, she wasn't hurt! She cautiously got up and walked carefully. No, nothing broken. Might as well go to class!

We may think improving our balance means we don't fall. The above examples are about a reality of life: sometimes people fall. The question the Feldenkrais Method asks is HOW do we fall? With grace and ease, and thus less damage? Or with stiffness and brittleness, and thus more pain and injury?

As I continue my growth in Feldenkrais work and watch my students evolve, I see a more natural way to move. I see an ease and a sense of connection. And I see each client operate more as a whole person and less as stiff parts. So if you happen to lose your balance and fall, I wish you ease and flexibility in your falling, freedom and softness in your landing, and no broken bones!

Mary Susan Chen is a Physical Therapist and Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner currently practicing in Chicago's near western suburbs. Her love and study of movement has also included gymnastics, tai chi, yoga, meditation, and InterPlay.

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Balance Through Reversibility (Sit to Stand and Stand to Sit)

–by Jean Elvin, GCFP

Marshall was 86 years old and referred to me by his brother, a regular client. Marshall’s major complaint was that he had trouble sitting on the couch without falling the last 12 to 16 inches, and could not get up again without a hand from his wife who, also elderly, risked being pulled onto the couch – or worse yet, toppling both of them onto the floor. Since Marshall was quite a tall fellow, he sensed that if he did fall, it would be a long way down, with a sizable impact. He had some stiffness, but no major knee problems, and was able to walk into my office with the help of a cane. Before asking Marshall to sit down on my table, I asked him to tap his foot, both the forefoot and the heel, on each side, which he could do.

I invited Marshall to sit on my table, which was at chair height. We worked on having Marshall shift his weight side to side, to feel the pressure shift as he rocked mostly onto one “sitting bone” and then the other, sort of like walking sitting down. (The sitting bones are the base of the pelvis, and are rounded like deep rockers – just like the feet are the base when standing and walking). We added the game of reversing the movement often, so that each shift could be long or short, while staying slow enough to really feel each part of the motion. Next, we played with a forward shift, leaning his head and shoulders forward, bending over his feet. Without trying to straighten up, he practiced sensing when his weight balanced over his feet, when back on the heels, and when forward on the front part of both feet.

A major improvement occurred when he realized that he could find equilibrium this way, with his head leaning well forward and his hips well back, sensing when his hips would begin to just barely leave the chair, and paying attention to the sensation in his feet for helpful cues as to whether he was “on his feet.” After practicing the shifting movement forward and backward many times, reversing it, and then reversing the reverse, it became a more familiar and secure action. While resting and in between, we did more foot tapping.

Only after finding his balance over his feet did we begin to work on “unfolding toward standing up and folding again.” Reversibility was helpful to Marshall because it gave him a chance to practice and sense the smaller parts of the movement, without going back to his habit of rushing to get up or down, using momentum to “throw himself forward or back.”

In the span of just one lesson, Marshall was able to master the timing and coordination of shifting onto his feet to unfold and stand, as well as reversing the action, staying on his feet while folding to sit. This ability gave him more independence and increased his sense of safety in getting around. He was not only more graceful in using his balance, he was grateful... and so was his wife.

Jean Elvin, GCFP, maintains a Feldenkrais® practice in Palo Alto, California. She specializes in working with dancers, seniors, and those with neurological issues. Find her at www.sweetagility.com.
Head and Eyes and Balance: An Awareness Through Movement® Lesson

–by Chris Elms, GCFP

1. Find a nice place to stand, a wooden floor, or better, outside, with grass, sand, or small gravel underfoot. Provide yourself with a pleasant view, if possible. Stand with your feet shoulder width apart and sense how your feet connect with the ground. Follow your breathing and notice the view in front of you.

2. Easily, three to five times, turn your head right and left as you normally would. Stop and rest for a few breaths. Then, once more turn your head right and left a number of times; keep noticing the view shifting in front of you as you turn. Can you scan this view in a continuous fashion, as you turn to the right and left, keeping your eyes on the horizon? Go slowly, to follow your breathing, and pay attention to seeing what is in front of you without darting past anything and jumping ahead in your vision. Is this different than your normal usage of your eyes as you turn? Return to the center and rest with your eyes closed. Notice your balance as you rest.

3. Open your eyes. Take your right foot back a little and bend it so that you are using the toes of the right foot more for balance than standing. In this position, sense the ground under your left foot and your breathing. Notice what happens if you shift slightly to the front of your left foot, the back, the inner edge, and the outer edge of this foot. Then allow your weight to be equal throughout your left foot, and slowly turn your head to the right and the left. Notice the difference in your balance if you use your eyes in a jumpy fashion, or if you let yourself see the view as it shifts continuously.

4. Bring your right foot back to the position in #1 and rest, standing with your eyes closed. Notice your balance on both your feet and enjoy the quality of your breathing.

5. Bring your right foot back and bend your toes as you did earlier. Raise and lower your head 3 to 5 times in a manner such that your eyes dart up when you lift your head up and dart down when you lower your head down. Rest briefly with your right foot behind and then raise and lower your head a number of times such that your eyes move continuously up as your head moves up and your eyes move continuously down as your head moves down. Notice the difference in your balance when you use your eyes in these two different ways.

6. Again, bring your right foot back to position one (feet flat, shoulder width apart) and rest, standing with your eyes closed. Notice your balance on both your feet and your breathing.

7. Repeat steps 3-6, this time with your left foot back.

8. Take a walk and see how you feel on your feet as you move around. Notice your view of the world as you walk through it.