Fitness, Exercise, and the Feldenkrais Method®

by Steven Shafarman, GCFP

Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais had strong opinions about exercise, and would surely condemn current conventional practices.

Moshe’s final visit to the United States was in 1981. I was his assistant that summer, and with him at his last public workshop, Labor Day weekend in Washington, DC. Jogging was very popular at the time, and as we drove through Rock Creek Park each morning we saw hundreds of joggers. “They think they’re doing themselves some good,” Moshe remarked. With his nose pressed against the car window, he described the harms of jogging, the damage to feet, knees, hip joints, backs, and overall. His unforgettable final phrase, “cardiovascular masturbation.”

The following week, he asked me to travel with him to Orlando, Florida, where he taped a series of interviews for the Medicine Man cable TV program. The studio was owned by Nautilus, manufacturer of hi-tech exercise machines, which were quite popular at the time, and two doctors gave us a tour of their research center. Of course Moshe wanted to see the machines with someone using them. “Steven, get on that one.” I’d never tried Nautilus, so one of the doctors told me what to

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do. As I began, Moshe noted that the machine constrained the movement of my trunk. It does that, the doctors explained, to target specific shoulder muscles.

While I was on a second machine, Moshe talked about the fact that muscles never work independently; the nervous system constantly coordinates muscles throughout the body. The doctors explained that Nautilus is a whole body exercise, because it works all the muscles when people use all the machines. The third machine was for the hip flexors. “Do too many repetitions with that one,” Moshe said, “and you’ll be an impotent man.” I stopped. So did our tour.

In similar ways and for similar reasons, he often denounced sit-ups, push-ups, and other exercises that seek to stretch or strengthen individual muscles. Real strength, he taught us, involves all of the muscles working harmoniously with relatively low even tone. Any muscle that’s tighter than necessary – six-pack abs, for example – impairs movement overall, and results in weakness, not strength.

People occasionally told him they did yoga, and asked for his opinion. “You’re ruining your hip joints.” That was not just arrogance. He’d studied yoga thoroughly, countless people who did yoga came to his classes, and he’d seen a lot of ruined hip joints. The problems with yoga, as he described them, come with the precision of the postures, plus the force and focus people apply in their desire to do it properly. When we set specific goals, we are less aware of everything else. When we use any excess effort, we are less able to sense differences, therefore less able to prevent or relieve discomfort; this is a fact of neuroscience that’s fundamental to the Feldenkrais Method.

Awareness must come first, Moshe insisted. It’s vital for fitness and healing. This is why I chose Awareness Heals as the title for my book about the Feldenkrais Method.

The world of fitness and exercise has changed significantly since Moshe died in 1984. Yoga today is more demanding, with a few exceptions, and vastly more popular. Gyms and health clubs were rather rare; now they’re everywhere, and full of equipment that’s more targeted and specialized than Nautilus. People typically exercise while watching TV, talking on cell phones, listening to music or recorded books; such practices are effectively anti-awareness. Many people now believe we can’t be fit and healthy, maybe don’t deserve to be, unless we exercise regularly.

These beliefs and practices became more common throughout the 1990s, and I was increasingly concerned, sometimes frustrated. My students improved significantly with Feldenkrais® lessons, often just one or two lessons. Frequently, however, those who went to the gym had a recurrence of their pain. Some realized that the exercise was a problem, but they wanted a vigorous fitness routine. Many asked for recommendations. Is

“Real strength, [Moshe] taught us, involves all of the muscles working harmoniously with relatively low even tone.”
there a fitness practice that's consistent with Moshe's insights? How can we avoid or prevent the problems he saw with yoga, jogging, stretching, push-ups, and such? Are there fitness activities that enhance the benefits of Feldenkrais lessons?

My answers start with asking my students, especially those with chronic pain, if they do any regular exercise or fitness activities, what type, how often, with what results, and if they enjoy it. This is critical. Exercise is often a cause or exacerbating factor with chronic pain, even when it provides temporary relief through endorphin production or increased blood flow. A key to lasting progress, I find, is to help my students modify their fitness and exercise practices. Based on what they tell me, I give them ways to use their exercise as an opportunity for learning and healing, and my advice is tailored to fit their specific concerns. Here are some all-purpose recommendations:

• While you exercise, be extra attentive to your breathing, and breathe freely.
• Sense and think about the way your ribs move as you exhale and as you inhale.
• Actively scan and sense your whole body throughout the activity.
• Seek to make every movement pleasant, which might be slower and smaller.
• Protect any places that have been painful, while seeking to move more freely elsewhere.

I also encourage people to find fitness activities they truly enjoy, such as dancing, swimming, biking, hiking, or martial arts. The best activities are social as well, and involve learning to be more skillful. The social and learning aspects enhance meaning and intrinsic value, thereby making the activity more than an exercise.

More generally, I encourage everyone to exercise with a sense of curiosity, like a healthy child. What can I discover right now? How can I be more comfortable? More skillful? More aware? Are there ways to make this activity more pleasant?

By asking ourselves such questions, we can make any fitness activity more effective and more beneficial. This is the attitude of organic learning. As I teach these ideas and practices, I often imagine Moshe smiling and approving. I think he'd smile and approve of this article, as well.

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He is also the creator of FlexAware, which applies the teachings of Moshe Feldenkrais to fitness and exercise. Steven is the author of six books, including Awareness Heals: The Feldenkrais Method for Dynamic Health.

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A Remarkable Recovery from Torn Knee Ligaments

by Mary Debono, GCFP

It’s horrifying to think of someone being dragged by a frightened horse, tearing four knee ligaments completely in half and breaking her lower leg in three places. But rather than resigning herself to an inactive life with a “bad leg,” Nicki Branch amazed her orthopedic physician by hiking up a mountain less than ten months after her accident. And her remarkable recovery did not involve surgery.

To put the damage into perspective, the orthopedist said it was the worst soft tissue injury he had ever seen. Nicki had torn her anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), posterior cruciate ligament (PCL), medial collateral ligament (MCL) and lateral collateral ligament (LCL). In fact, Nicki’s case was so severe that it was presented at several medical conferences. The grim prognosis was that recovery would take at least 18 months and the patient could not expect to have a fully functioning knee. But the physicians didn’t know Nicki.

I met Nicki through our mutual love of horses. I was a presenter at the Holistic Horse Workshop, an educational seminar that featured complementary approaches to horse and rider care. As I described how the brain often needs to be retrained after injury, Nicki listened closely. Although her fractures had healed and her ligaments were mending, she was still in significant pain and walked with a pronounced limp. As she sat in the audience that day, she had a feeling that my work could help her.

Nicki is the founder of FalconRidge Equine Rescue in Valley Center, California. For several years, she has rescued, rehabilitated and re-homed horses. Having helped countless horses overcome lameness, near starvation, neglect and abuse, Nicki was no stranger to recovery. It’s just this time she needed to focus her recovery on herself.

I had the pleasure of giving Nicki her first Feldenkrais Method® session on September 25, 2012, about nine months after her injury. During our Feldenkrais® session, I discovered that Nicki’s protective neuromuscular bracing, which she developed after the injury, was now working against her. Guarding and compensating for her damaged leg had become a habit, but a habit that had outlived its usefulness. Nicki was unconsciously tensing and overusing certain muscles while avoiding others. This inhibited her movement and created unnecessary strain.

It is very common for people to hold onto protective habits since they once served a useful purpose. But these...

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unhealthy movement patterns can cause pain, stiffness and damage to joints over time. They interfere with freedom of movement and quality of life. Most people, however, don’t realize that they have these harmful movement habits.

The Feldenkrais Method works to uncover such inefficient habits of movement and helps people learn how to move in a more comfortable, efficient and healthier way. Aches and pains often disappear. Flexibility, balance, posture and coordination improve. Simply put, the Feldenkrais Method helps us develop awareness, so that we can move through life with ease and grace.

With her increased awareness, Nicki’s limp, and pain, virtually disappeared. If she felt pain starting to return, Nicki adjusted her gait and walking became comfortable again. Remarkably, just days after our second Feldenkrais session, Nicki drove to the Sierras and hiked nine miles up to 11,000 feet in elevation!

Interestingly, the Feldenkrais Method has its origins in a devastating knee injury. Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, a physicist, engineer and martial artist, had badly injured his knee playing soccer as a young man. Years later, he re-injured his knee while working on a submarine. The doctors wanted to operate, but gave him only a 50% chance of being able to walk again.

Unwilling to accept those odds, Dr. Feldenkrais set about learning how to improve himself. Ever the scientist, he used his own body as a laboratory. Making tiny, delicate movements, Dr. Feldenkrais explored how his knee functioned. He discovered that small, slow movements allowed him to feel more than larger, effortful movements.

Moshe Feldenkrais said that our greatest quality is the ability to recover. Nicki Branch, a woman who devotes so much of her life helping horses recover from dire situations, has that quality in spades. She is an inspiration to us all.

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Stimulating Behavioral Changes in Children

by Joyce Ann OTR/L, GCFP

When I first met Enrique*, a cute three year old boy, he stood by the doorway, tilted his chin downward, moved his eyes upward and growled at me. He wanted to play with a simple shape sorter. However Enrique had difficulty focusing, manipulating and matching the objects. He sat on his heels, leaned on one hand, and would not let go of one shape until another was given to him. Enrique required redirection to the sorting activity every 5-15 seconds. When it was time to put toys away, he cried and flung himself on the floor. In order to calm him, his mother quickly gave her son another object to hold.

Enrique’s mother said he did not like to swing or climb on the playground and I learned that he did not like to lie on his stomach. When working further with Enrique, we discovered he liked doing backward somersaults with help. During the session, Enrique imitated words, but he did not initiate them, and he babbled quietly to himself.

Six sessions later, Enrique opened the door for me to enter the room, gestured to me and told me, “Come on in.” Enrique not only quickly completed an alphabet puzzle independently, but did so by turning it around to match the pieces correctly upside down. He did this without help or breaks.

During later sessions Enrique spontaneously talked to me in both English and Spanish, shared stories, and drew and described colored pictures using 3-5 word sentences.

Enrique was no longer upset when it came time to put the toys away. In addition, a speech therapy evaluation showed an eleven month improvement within a three week period, which brought his language skills to an age appropriate level.

When a child makes this type of rapid progress, it is often justified as “maturity.” Skeptics think Enrique would have improved regardless of the type or quality of intervention he received. I suppose that’s always a possibility. However, I would like to offer another explanation for the reason Enrique made this dramatic change in a relatively short time period.

Enrique had poorly formed habits and

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difficulty multi-tasking. His delayed fine motor skills (speech and hand function), and his inadequate attention span, were indicators of a poorly organized central nervous system. He could not group together simple tasks necessary to perform a more complex activity, such as sorting blocks into groups prior to matching them to their holes. These are tasks which require the physical abilities to look, reach, grasp, place, and release. All these tasks are actions dependent upon a well-functioning central nervous system.

As a Feldenkrais Practitioner, I asked the question: How were Enrique's poorly formed physical patterns of self-use affecting his overall function? He appeared to be distracted, perhaps because of his poorly organized torso, along with the rigidity in his spine, shoulders, ribcage and pelvis. This rigidity meant each action required more effort to meet with success and perhaps it distracted him from the task at hand. If a three year old child like Enrique is hindered by physical tension and rigidity, then it is no wonder that new challenges are met with growls, with the expectation of failure.

What if shifting weight with ease leaves a child free to reach with more relaxed shoulders and ease of grasp? Would this in turn leave a child freer to think and do? To answer these questions it is important to look at and understand habit.

What is a habit and how are habits formed?
A habit is something that we do automatically and don’t have to think about. It is a frequently used brain pathway or a group of neural connections that repeatedly fire together. These neural pathways start out as separate motions and as we become more proficient, gradually, our brain groups these multiple tasks together and forms a new pathway. The familiar pattern enables us to perform complex activities. When movements become more automatic, our brain can focus on higher levels of functioning. For example, after learning to balance on a bicycle, individuals can pay attention to the streets while riding. A child who can sit comfortably in the classroom, can

I worked with Enrique through Functional Integration® (FI®) lessons, the hands-on approach to the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education. Through a variety of body positions and actions, including sitting, prone, or upside down, we explored undifferentiated and differentiated movements. Most importantly, Enrique found them enjoyable.

Undifferentiated movements are more primitive movement patterns that engage larger areas of the body as a single unit. Differentiated movements separate the undifferentiated movements into segmental movement patterns and provide a backdrop of new sensory information. This new sensory based information provides fertile ground for the development of newer, more efficient motoric habits. Some applications of this would be as follows: Could Enrique learn to sit comfortably and rotate his torso to reach for a toy or would he need to completely shift his position, and disrupt his thought process in order to grasp the toy? Similarly, if you want to turn to look into a window while walking down the street, is that possible? Or, would you need to stop, turn your whole body toward the window, look, and then resume your walking?

Once Enrique learned to move fluidly and with less effort, these movements became more comfortable and automatic. He started to multi-task, which raised his self-confidence and allowed him to pay more attention to cognitive challenges. He sat in

Daniel and Ty. Photographer: Joyce Ann. Used with permission.
Stimulating Behavioral Changes
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a variety of positions, shifting his weight, rotating and bending his torso, and at the same time, he could scan his environment, reach, manipulate objects, or explore his options. Enrique learned to expand and contract his ribcage more easily and this allowed him to feel the vibrations and movements of his tongue and palette as he explored speaking. Suddenly Enrique had viable options to growling, enjoyable ones.

Early in his life, Enrique formed semi-functional habits that were reinforced daily through repetition. Other children may behave differently due to a poorly organized central nervous system. They might be shy, unable to sit still, fidget with their hands, or flop down on the floor or at their desk. They may be uncomfortable with tags in their clothing or dislike being touched. They may frustrate easily and refuse challenging tasks or give up easily.

Children sometimes become more distractible or disorganized just before or after a growth spurt. They may be moody, sleep poorly, or not listen as well. This can happen if the child is trying new things and has not yet found the most comfortable way to accomplish a task. The child may be organizing new information and integrating this new learning.

Keep in mind that the brain does not learn in a linear pattern. It is not always possible to predict what effect improving movement will have for a child. This depends greatly on the child’s wishes and desires, which may be different than the wishes of caregivers in that child’s life. What is clear is that there is an overall benefit when children move more fluently and have a more clearly defined use of self, and that other changes will happen elsewhere, sometimes in surprising ways.

When Daniel, a 10 year old nonverbal child with Down’s syndrome, first came to me, he was unable to remain in one place for the Functional Integration® (FI®) lessons and frequently ran to the light switch and turned on and off the lights and ceiling fan. He was afraid of dogs, and shrieked and jumped when he saw one, even from a distance. Daniel was not toilet trained. However, according to his mother, within a few months, he began to sense when he needed to use the toilet and with assistance learned to use it appropriately. Daniel currently sits with me for longer periods of time, comfortably leaning against me, sometimes for a whole session without turning on the fan or light. He currently seeks out and pats my dog. According to his mother, he now eagerly approaches other dogs as well.

Last week I asked the mother of a two year old what she noticed new about her son over the last several weeks. Kevin* was tired and cranky that day, and his mom was frustrated with his behavior. At first she answered: “Nothing changed.” As she continued telling me about the week, she said, “Well, he’s talking more spontaneously, he’s easier to take places, he’s cooperating more, and he hasn’t (intentionally) banged his head very much lately.”

During the difficult moments of childrearing, especially a special needs child, it is important to appreciate even the smallest changes the child makes. These changes are the building blocks for further growth. Enrique, Daniel and Kevin each made positive behavioral changes by learning to move more efficiently and joyfully through the Feldenkrais Method® of Somatic Education. Enjoyment brought a willingness and interest in exploring new options which generated new behaviors and habits. Given new learning opportunities, this growth will continue with each child throughout the child’s lifetime.

*Enrique and Kevin’s names have been changed.

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