Issue #6: Applications in the Workplace

When people think of ergonomics, they usually think of the height and arrangement of furniture and equipment. But posture and movement are very important components. In fact, Nation’s Business reported in March, 1990, that only 20% of workplace injuries, such as such as back strain and carpal tunnel syndrome, were related to workstation design; the remaining 80% to poor worker postural habits.

Adjust Your Positions as Well as Your Furniture

Many postural habits begin in childhood, and often we aren’t really aware of our tendencies. Habit dulls the sensory awareness: if you sit a certain way long enough, your brain will stop noticing that it’s not comfortable. For instance, many computer users mouse with the arm held a long way from the body. This position creates static load—essentially, you are holding up the weight of your arm all day. A similar strain happens in the shoulders if the head is held too far forward. But the inherent strain may not be noticed until it becomes pain—by which time injury may have occurred to the connective tissue.

Awareness helps you notice sooner when your postural habits tend toward strain. Feldenkrais® is a great asset here: you learn to sense for yourself when you are in better alignment with gravity. You learn tools for being aware of your range of comfort, so you can make appropriate changes before damage occurs. You are also introduced to optional ways of sitting, shifting weight and moving, which has multiple benefits: choices of action allow the nervous system to adapt to changing conditions, and variety of movement prevents static load.

The postural training often offered by ergonomic salespeople amounts to a one-shot lecture on “proper posture,” as if you could assume the correct position and maintain it all day. Even if you could, it would just produce stiffness. Because Feldenkrais practitioners understand the dynamics of movement, they are ideally suited to introduce lasting improvement in the workplace. For example, Mary Newell’s firm (<NEWELLWW@aol.com>), implements training programs based on Feldenkrais principles. “I empower employees to be more responsible for their own well-being,” says Ms. Newell. “Participants learn principles of active sitting, use of the arms for keying, how to give relief to eyes, neck and shoulders, how to vary posture during the day to prevent static load. With fewer discomforts, employees can put their whole attention on their job, and productivity and job satisfaction increase.”
The Eyes Have It

Sabine Thompson does translation work on a freelance basis. She spends many hours in front of a word processor and feels the strain on her eyes. “I can start without my glasses but sometimes during the day, my eyes start to blur so I need to put them on.” She has found AWARENESS THROUGH MOVEMENT lessons involving the eyes to be particularly useful.

One lesson Sabine learned from her teacher, Kira Charles, involves “spiraling the eyes.” After several preparatory movements, the student is asked to move one eye in a circle clockwise a few times and then counter-clockwise. The student begins to feel how one direction seems to “tighten” the eye, while the other direction seems to “loosen” the eye. The student is then asked to move the eye in the loosening direction as if untwisting the lid of a jar. The student then does the same with the other eye. This lesson relaxes the optic nerve.

“I knew there was something different,” Sabine later said, “and then I realized that I had worked the whole day without needing my glasses. Even when I was reading at home that night I didn’t need them.”

If you experience eye strain, try even this small piece of an exercise for starters, and let us know how it worked for you. Just remember that the more slowly and gently you move, the greater benefit you will receive. If you move too quickly or with too much force, you won’t be able to sense the “tightening and loosening” effect.

Imaging the Way to Accurate Drafting

In some AWARENESS THROUGH MOVEMENT lessons, students are led through a series of movements on one side and then repeat the movements on the other side solely in their imaginations. Students discover that the changes which occur on the “imaginary” side are as great or greater than those felt on the “active” side.

The impulses directing the muscles when imagining a movement follow the same pathways which they would follow when actually doing the movement. The message to the brain is the same -- no matter how small the impulse, the movement has been made according to the intention of the brain.

Engineer Ira Hooper has adapted this practice to his drafting and hand lettering. He finds that if he does the movement in his mind’s eye a second before making the motion with his hand, the lines he draws are very accurate. In fact, he has increased his accuracy significantly.

“I relax, anticipate what my hand has to do to make the first stroke for the first letter and then I make the stroke. The anticipation of feeling is very close to what I actually do and I can make my letters with precision.”

FELDENKRAIS in the Newsroom

Due to an "epidemic" of carpal tunnel and other computer-related problems, a doctor working for the New York Times brought in FELDENKRAIS practitioner Sharon Oliensis. The Times was especially interested in FELDENKRAIS because of escalating workers compensation costs due to workplace stresses.

Sharon taught lunchtime AWARENESS THROUGH MOVEMENT classes twice a week and gave private sessions once a week.

Through these sessions, says Sharon, "I was able to help the employees make the connection between the difficulties they were experiencing and the ways they moved when working.”

Friends of Feldenkrais

Friends of Feldenkrais is a way for the public to become more connected with the FELDENKRAIS METHOD.

Individual Memberships:

$25 • Basic benefits: Quarterly Newsletter - SenseAbility, 10% discount off books and tapes, article “The FELDENKRAIS METHOD” by Moshe Feldenkrais, and discounts on Annual Conference workshops

$50 • Basic benefits, plus FELDENKRAIS Logo T-Shirt

$75 • Basic Benefits, plus ATM Audio tape by Moshe Feldenkrais, and Friends of Feldenkrais® polo T-Shirt

To join, call the FELDENKRAIS GUILD® of North America at (800) 775-2118 or email: membership@feldenkrais.com

Did you know...

There are over 1000 GUILD CERTIFIED FELDENKRAIS PRACTITIONERS™ in Canada and the United States.

On any given day, over 3000 people in North America receive a FUNCTIONAL INTEGRATION lesson.

Each week, 18,000 people take AWARENESS THROUGH MOVEMENT classes!
A Systemic Approach to Workplace Injury

Workplace injuries, particularly those brought about by repetitive activities such as assembly line work or computer keyboarding, can be highly complex and multifaceted phenomena. The way we conceptualize an injury has a strong influence on how we think about dealing with it. Indeed, even the act of labeling it as an injury can introduce a strong bias in how we think about it. The FELDENKRAIS Method helps prevent workplace injuries and facilitate their healing when they do occur.

FELDENKRAIS Practitioner Ralph Strauch, author of LOW-STRESS COMPUTING: Using Awareness to Avoid RSI, (<rstrauch@somatic.com>) believes that it is important to understand how the FELDENKRAIS conceptual perspective differs from that of the medical profession.

“The medical perspective,” says Ralph, who practices in Pacific Palisades, California, “focuses on the localized injury as a pathology at a particular site in the body. This leads to diagnoses such as tendonitis (an inflamed tendon), carpal tunnel syndrome (a narrowing of the passage-way through the wrist known as the carpal tunnel), or a nerve impingement occurring at some particular location along the nerve’s pathway. Localized treatment is then applied to the pathology, through measures such as drugs to reduce inflammation or surgery to correct mechanical damage.”

On the other hand, the FELDENKRAIS perspective attends to the more systemic patterns of muscular organization and body use which produce the stresses leading to and maintaining injury. The FELDENKRAIS practitioner does not attempt to treat the localized injury. (Indeed, most practitioners have no medical training, and are not authorized to provide medical treatment.) Instead, he helps through teaching you to become more aware of how you use your body, and to learn easier and more efficient ways of functioning.

When you go to see a FELDENKRAIS practitioner about a painful hand and wrist, he may surprise you by beginning to work with your ribcage and your spine. When the pain is in your wrist, this may not make sense from a medical perspective. The practitioner may have observed, however, that you sit hunched forward with your spine bent and your torso rigid. This posture leads to extra effort in your shoulders and arms, and on down into your hands and wrists. The hand is where the problem “popped out,” but its source lies nearer the core of your body.

“Learning to maintain a more supple ribcage,” says Ralph, “will help you become more aware of how you support your torso when you sit. This, in turn, can facilitate greater awareness of and less tension in your spine, shoulders and arms. You then put less unnecessary tension into your wrists and hands as you work. By working with the underlying patterns which produced the injury rather than with the injury itself, the practitioner has initiated a process of change which goes far beyond reducing the pain in your hand.”

Integrating Change into Daily Life

Tova Lelah, an environmental analyst at UCLA, originally came to Ralph Strauch because of upper back and neck pain. Ralph initially worked with the organization of her upper body, then gradually branched out into other areas of functioning as well. After one lesson which focused on the contact between her feet and the floor and the patterns of support which radiate upwards through the skeleton, Tova sent Ralph an e-mail describing the changes she experienced at her office.

“I just had to write and tell you what has happened since you worked on my feet yesterday. Sitting at my computer with my feet relaxed and flat on floor, I realized that my chair back was too high, causing me to bend forward a little - so I lowered it. Then I realized that my monitor was too low so I raised it to sit on top of my hard drive - so it’s at least 6 inches higher . . . and voila! I have transformed my sitting to an almost effortless posture!!!!! I JUST CAN’T BELIEVE THAT I’VE NEVER THOUGHT OF DOING THIS BEFORE. Your Functional Integration lessons work in truly mysterious ways. Somehow the word thanks isn’t enough - but thanks anyway. Tova”

Ralph says, “Her new sense of contact with the floor provided a catalyst to bring together and integrate changes initiated by earlier lessons, connecting her to her world in a new and better way.”

Neither Ralph nor Tova had anticipated the results Tova describes in her email. These were her own discoveries. Tova was able to apply her expanding self-awareness to her workplace and develop a new and better way to work.
**A short AWARENESS THROUGH MOVEMENT® Lesson**

Sit comfortably in a chair with your feet flat on the floor.

1. Turn your head to the right without forcing it. Notice how far you turn. Return back to the center. Repeat, confirming for yourself your comfortable range of movement.

2. Take your left hand and put it on your neck just below the right ear. Press or squeeze the big muscle below your ear (the sternocleidomastoid) on the right side with the left fingers to limit its action.

3. Breathe out while slowly turning your head to right toward your hand and then to the left. Repeat 2-3 times.

4. Drop your hand and turn to the right. Notice the change in range of rotation.

5. Bring your left hand up and again hold the muscle. This time, as you breathe out and turn your head, keep your eyes to the front. Repeat 2-3 times.

6. Drop your hand and turn to the right again. Notice the further increase in range of rotation.

   Change sides and repeat. Is the change the same on both sides?

"What I am after is to restore each person to their human dignity"
- Moshe Feldenkrais D.Sc.