

Feldenkrais Method Training Takes Occupational Therapist to a More Functional Level

—By Joyce Ann

A first-time client came to me with complaints of constant pain and severe headaches as a result of a chronic condition called Fibromyalgia. She reported using anti-inflammatory drugs and muscle relaxants daily for several years. I sat her down and asked her to show me the simple movement of looking to her right and immediately noticed that most of the movement was in her neck. I gently placed my hand along her spine to feel the movement in that area and we continued to gently explore turning movements like this. After approximately five minutes she said, "Wow, how do you know where to put your hand? I can't believe I'm doing this without any pain. This is so neat." She walked out of the lesson pain free and the following week reported no headaches all week and feeling more energized.

Not every client comes in with pain and walks out pain free, but since I found the *Feldenkrais Method*, I have had many more experiences similar to this one with both adults and children. I have heard many parents express joy as to their child's progress. I have watched many children's firsts, such as children rolling over for the first time, the first time creeping, the first time opening a fist hand, or lying on their belly without crying.

I was first educated as an Occupational Therapist, however training in the *Feldenkrais Method* has greatly changed my way of thinking, learning, and working with clients. It has taught me how to connect with myself and others in a way I couldn't before.

In Occupational Therapy school we were taught how to evaluate a patient's ability to perform everyday activities and then to form goals to help the patient accomplish these tasks. After extensive experience in the traditional therapy world, I began to question the manner in which these goals were being carried out. I have often heard complaints that therapy is painful and dreaded. I have seen people grimace and moan during stretching or strengthening exercises and others stiffen up areas of their bodies in order to lift a weight. I have seen children forced to stand up when they were unable to sit, and children's hands shaken or pried open and an object placed in them. I began to feel something was being overlooked in the traditional approach to therapy. There had to be more efficient and natural ways to help a person improve his/her functional capabilities. Something was missing.

Here are some of my missing links:

1. As a traditional therapist, I used to evaluate a client

and form goals to improve on areas of weakness. This premise has since become baffling to me. We do not build houses on weak foundations. We have engineers to tell us what is necessary to support the weight of a structure. Similarly, don't people need a base of support to build upon? When I work with a client, I base the sessions on helping them explore ways to use their maximum potential by building on their strengths and intelligence. It's the difference between looking at a situation and asking, "Is the glass half empty or is the glass half full?" I opt for the latter.

When a parent talks to me about his/her child with special needs, I'm often told about the many things the child cannot do, such as not using one arm enough, not liking to sit up and play, not holding his bottle, banging toys and not playing with purpose. Even the child's strengths are sometimes misconstrued as a deficit. "If he wants something, he finds ways to get it, but I want him to do it in a way that's more age appropriate," or "He can do it, but it looks weird." To these types of comments, I like to respond with something like: "Isn't that wonderful? Look how intelligent your child is that he can find alternative ways to do something. This is a child who has great capacity for learning."

I look at a child who uses one hand exclusively and I ask myself, "How can I teach him how to do this activity more easily with the hand he prefers to use?" When I watch a person move with difficulty I ask myself, "Where is this person moving the most? Where is this person not moving? How can I teach this person to become more aware of what he is doing so that he can incorporate new movements into his daily life?" Each new movement leads to more possibilities and further expands the person's function.

2. As a traditional therapist, I measured and treated joint range of motion and muscle strength deficits by isolating particular joints and muscle groups. In the *Feldenkrais Method*, I explore ways in which the client can use himself more fully in order to improve his range of motion and strength. With more evenly distributed movements of the skeleton, the individual learns to transmit forces and generate powerful movements with less muscular effort and less wear and tear on all connective tissues.

Often individuals who experience pain or range of motion deficits are actually experiencing movement limitations in areas other than that of the deficit. For example, I worked with a man who was unable to raise his arm above shoulder height. For months, with a traditional therapist, I observed that he had been diligently stretching his muscles to gain more movement in his shoulder and the improvement was slow, painful, and temporary.

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During our first session, we noticed that he did not involve areas of his ribs, sternum, clavicles, and spine, particularly between the shoulder blades and therefore we explored the possibilities of movement in these areas. When he left, he raised his arm well above shoulder level with no pain. The next session he said to me, "I don't know what happened, but it's like something finally gave and I could move my shoulder again."

3. I have redefined "fine motor" movements as being more than movements of the hand. I have come to realize through the *Feldenkrais Method*, that the delicate and subtle movements of our whole body are "fine motor." I like to call the movements of the torso "proximal fine motor" moves and I invite clients to pay attention to these, particularly in relationship to more distal movements, such as the hands.

Some comments I hear from my clients or their parents:

"I feel so much lighter and freer."

"I never knew I had ribs that could move there."

"My doctor calls him the miracle child. He never thought he'd be able to do all this."

"How come you got my son to start crawling in two weeks when other therapists have tried for six months and haven't been able to do it?"

"I've seen improvement in all areas of my son's life. He's climbing on things, he wants to hang on bars at the playground now..."

"Since you started working with him, he seems calmer and he listens better."

I am not a miracle worker. I'm just applying the techniques and theories that were taught to me. Each person is different and I am learning to recognize these subtle differences. Any time we work with our body it affects our mind, and when we effect changes in the mind, it affects the body. Why do older children tell me that they are better able to concentrate in school after our sessions? There isn't always a pattern or a traceable way to predict these things. **What I do know is that when I recognize a person's strengths and build upon these strengths, positive changes happen.**

Perhaps one of my biggest personal accomplishments, according to my 12 year old son, an enthusiastic baseball player, is that I am learning to throw a ball farther and with more accuracy. He couldn't understand why I threw "like a girl," therefore this summer he gave me throwing lessons. With the self-awareness that I have acquired through the *Feldenkrais Method*, I have learned how to feel the distribution of movement throughout my body. I am by no means even close to being an accomplished ball thrower, but I can now play a game of catch with my son! **DD**

Strengthen learning capabilities.
Build attention and concentration.

Improve freedom of movement.
Manage pain, stress and tension.

Improve vestibular functioning.
Strengthen multi-tasking skills.



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BUILDING BETTER BALANCE