

A New Way to Learn to Move



Feldenkrais may not be a word that one naturally remembers, nor the easiest to spell, but many believe it has huge benefits as a form of movement education. For the past ten years, it has been a part of the rehabilitation program at the Swiss Paraplegic Centre Nottwil, one of

the most respected Spinal Units in the world. "The general feedback of the patients is very positive" writes Marcus Myerhans, head of psychology at Nottwil. Physiotherapists often report that patients have improved coordination of function after a Feldenkrais lesson.

So what is involved in the method, and what are its origins? The method was developed by Dr Moshe Feldenkrais, a physicist, engineer and martial artist in the 1940's. After developing a chronic knee problem, he combined his knowledge of martial arts, neurophysiology, anatomy, learning theory, child development, systems theory, physics and psychology to teach himself to walk again without pain. The method teaches the client to pay attention to how they move, and to develop new and easier ways of moving. For those with a spinal cord impairment (SCI) these functions can be anything from learning to breathe more easily and balance more comfortably in your wheelchair to walking.

Cindy Allison, a certified Feldenkrais practitioner, has been working specifically with SCI with positive results. Clients have mentioned that they have had surprising results below their level of injury - this after being diagnosed as being complete injuries.

"My first session with Cindy was incredible" observed Anthea Gunner, a complete paraplegic who found that after a few Feldenkrais sessions she was able to feel where her legs were, to feel sensation in her feet and to roll more easily. Johnny Bourke, a client of Cindy's, and a complete tetraplegic "During one session, Cindy was using the direct pressure technique on my ankle when I experienced an undeniable awareness of my ankle, as in where it was in space. This ankle awareness still exists to this present day". Hamish Ramsden, a C5/6 complete tetraplegic, who has been seeing Cindy for once a week six months, states that he is now more aware of his body and this he believes contributes in some small way to a feeling of improved stability. Cindy notes that both neurological and cognitive learning takes place. At a neurological level, the nervous system is being taught new patterns by doing new movements in an easier way. The brain will naturally select the path of least resistance; it will adopt that pattern of movement which is easiest. At the

cognitive level, the client learns the principles of movement and becomes more familiar with their own habits. It is a process of exploring personal movement styles and eventually facilitating ones own learning, with the intention of adopting easy, pain-free ways of moving.

The method is pain-free and relaxing for the client. This is not surprising when the focus is on creating and working with pleasurable movements. Another of Cindy's clients, Andrew Hall, makes a note of the methods relaxing qualities. "You feel so relaxed, and at the same time, you're doing something really good for yourself in a physical sense". The method stipulates that when movement becomes a source of pain, this can be detrimental to the learning process and make the situation worse for the client. This can be difficult for someone to grasp, as often we associate strength and movement training with pain, hence the popularity of the saying 'no pain, no gain'. The Feldenkrais method however dictates that it is pleasure that should be sought, as the body naturally responds more positively to pleasure than pain. When asked what motivated Cindy to become a Feldenkrais practitioner, she states that it started with a personal pursuit of a way to minimise her own pain associated with loss of movement. This led her to complete a Masters Degree (with Distinction) in psychology and have her results published in *The Australian Journal of Rehabilitation Counselling*. She strongly believes in listening to the client and as such, the method she uses is very client centred – perhaps this is one of the reasons why she has had such positive results from the clients she has seen.

Sessions with a certified practitioner range from \$60-\$100. Cindy is offering one free session and \$30 thereafter until October 31 for those with SCI. The method may not be a cure for those with SCI, but it does aid in movement and stability. Others who have used the method agree that after a session they also have a better sense of wellbeing. It is exciting that Cindy has a strong interest in working with those who have sustained an SCI, especially after such encouraging results from those she has worked with.

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