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Feldenkrais classes: a tuneup for mind and body

By Amy Verner
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You won't sweat or burn many calories with this body-awareness practice, but you'll feel physically and mentally restored

Try telling people you are going to a Feldenkrais class and the response is inevitably: Feldenwha...?

But so what if the name of this mind-body therapy does not exactly roll off the tongue. What matters is that it can help reduce chronic pain and muscle tightness while improving alignment, openness and range of motion.

I stumbled upon Feldenkrais (pronounced Fel-den-KRICE) while trying to find something low-impact after suffering a tear on the top of my foot two months ago. The location of the injury was so prohibitive that I couldn't even attempt child's pose, one of the most restful postures in yoga. I was going for acupuncture treatments, but craved something more active.

I would not break a sweat or burn many calories with Feldenkrais, Rosanna Carelli, the general manager at Balance Fitness in Toronto, told me. But she did mention that several students (note the terminology) use it as a form of rehab.

Sweat-o-meter: Feldenkrais

Muscle burn: 3 / 10



Cardio intensity: 1 / 10



Fun factor: 5 / 10



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The Feldenkrais method is named after Moshe Feldenkrais, a Ukrainian-born Renaissance man who worked as a cartographer, engineer and science officer with the British Admiralty and excelled at judo and self-defence.

Instead of having surgery to repair a nagging soccer injury, he developed a series of rehabilitation techniques using his own self-awareness, and published his first book about his discoveries in 1949. It was not until the late sixties through the mid-seventies that he taught others directly, first in Tel Aviv and then in the United States. (he died in 1984).

My classes were taught by long-time instructor Shelley Harris.

We begin by lying face-up on a mat. She uses the word "notice" a lot, as in "notice if your shoulders are up near your ears" or "notice if your lower back is touching the ground." Occasionally, she'll swap it for "scan." She instructs us to move our head side to side verrrry sloooowly. "You don't notice anything if you're moving fast," she explains.

One of the unique aspects to Feldenkrais is the concept of "scrambling." Here's the most basic example: Try turning your head to the right while looking to the left. Such co-ordinated movements feel counterintuitive, but are meant to re-pattern the nervous system and build new and more efficient habits.

It's almost as if the nervous system is treated like a muscle that needs to be exercised. But unlike muscles, which can feel sore post-workout, the mind feels refreshed and restored for the rest of the day. I imagine it's what a computer feels like after a software update.

Every Feldenkrais class starts with a small movement - something as simple as lifting your arms out of and back into your shoulder sockets - and you build upon it. Even though nothing ever feels exhausting, we take short rests; this helps ensure that each step sticks.

One morning, we spend an hour on our sternum, the bony plate that runs down the front of the chest. I've always known my hamstrings were tight, but never my sternum. Consequently, it takes more effort for me to rise in the way Ms. Harris instructs. "It's amazing how much energy it takes to be tight," she says as I nod.

Ms. Harris makes good use of foam rollers - long, dense cylindrical props that can help open up the chest and upper back or massage out various muscle groups depending on how they're positioned.

As with Pilates, there is a lot of emphasis on the pelvis and the core. "The pelvis is a powerhouse," Ms. Harris says. Bridge poses are common (raising the pelvis off the floor), as are rotations that engage the side body.

She usually closes with a few neck exercises before sending us on our way. "Your body will still be processing what you learned today," she says. "It can last a few hours, a few days, or forever."

Feldenkrais is not a workout in the traditional sense - nor is it a miracle cure. You will not walk in with a limp and out with a stride. But whether it was all the time off my feet, the acupuncture, or the five classes, I can once again complete short runs.

The point, Ms. Harris says, is to be "soft but strong." Too bad I can't use that to justify my less-than-firm stomach.

What is it?

A technique of co-ordinating mind and body, also known as Awareness Through Movement, used to treat a variety of conditions from chronic pain to symptoms of multiple sclerosis.

How hard is it?

Movements are gentle, but not necessarily easy. Focus is key.

What does it work?

It's less about strength than gaining insight into how we move through life. Hip-opening moves may be the focus one class; chest and back the next.

What are classes like?

At times there's a playful spirit, but ultimately it's as esoteric as exercise gets.

Who's taking it?

Occasionally athletes, but mostly older couples - the women to supplement their existing fitness programs, the men to improve their golf swings.

Sign me up!

Feldenkrais classes at Balance Fitness are open to non-members for \$20, www.balancefit.com. Visit www.feldenkrais.com for practitioners across Canada.

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