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Michael Sigman

Writer/Editor, Music Publisher

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Feldenkrais: Everything You 'Know' About Healing May Be Dead Wrong

A brain without a body could not think.

-- Moshe Feldenkrais

When I told her that cross-training on the exercise bike only added hip joint stiffness to my chronic shoulder pain, my Pilates instructor was incredulous. "Don't you get it?" she asked. "Your body is telling you to *stretch out* those aching muscles and tendons."

This made sense to me. But when Feldenkrais practitioner/physical therapist Stacy Barrows encouraged me to attend her class -- which, I imagined, would be all about the stretch -- I was wary. Our individual sessions were going well, but classes tend to induce peer pressure, and I worried about vigorous pulling on a still-tender area.

The class blew my mind. Virtually all we did was open and close our left hands as slowly as humanly possible. Okay, there was one other thing: *imagining* we were doing the same with our right hands.

It helped.

Feldenkrais, the strange, relatively obscure science-based theory put forward 55 years ago by physicist-turned-healer Moshe Feldenkrais, turns many of our cherished ideas about fitness and healing on their heads.

In Part 1, we saw that rather than treat an injury at its location, it's often most effective to pay attention to remote parts of the body which may seem unconnected.

Here, per the Gospel according to Feldenkrais, are five other common misconceptions:

1. *Faster is better.*

We're brought up to think that faster is better than slower and the more reps the merrier. In fact, we need to slow down, slow down and slow down. According to Feldenkrais expert Fred Onufryk, "When moving or exercising quickly, you can only do things how you have always done them. It's a habit. Moving slowly allows you be aware of what you are doing, lets you make distinctions and lets you choose a new and different way of doing things."

2. *"Stretching out" the injured area facilitates healing.*

Static stretching exercises for specific areas -- hamstrings, calves, arms, neck -- are frequently unhelpful and often counterproductive. Barrows: "Our modern lifestyle -- the hours we spend driving, sitting at the computer, watching TV, etc. -- saps the dexterity and mobility that we had as children. We've thought we could loosen up via static stretching regimens but research shows that what we really need is to reestablish the fine-tuned coordination necessary to access that childlike flexibility. Our nervous system has become accustomed to bodily tension and immobility, and sets 'trip wires' to protect and limit our movement."

3. *Good posture means standing straight and throwing your shoulders back.*

Posture is intimately related to movement, and we need many subtly modulated postures to maximize effortless movement. Think Michael Phelps gliding through the water. "Posture is generally taught as static when it's really a dynamic alignment that relies on spontaneous calibration of movement," Barrows says. "When people stop to think about how to stand or sit they often freeze in a position which sets up rigidity, and does not allow for resilience, adaptability with loss of balance, or shock absorption. The idea of straight is not an appropriate cue nor is pulling your shoulders back."

4. *Strength -- as in six-pack abs and rippling glutes -- keeps us in shape and prevents injuries.* Obviously we need strength, but intense weight-lifting and heavy calisthenics to develop the kind of muscles touted in *Men's Fitness* can hamper graceful movement.

Barrows says, "We tend to look at strength to solve our movement problems, but unwanted muscle tensions -- what Moshe Feldenkrais called 'parasitic contractions' -- are merely useless holding patterns that actually *interfere* with movement." According to Jeff Haller, PhD., "Dr. Feldenkrais would say, 'I'm teaching you to be strong.' I believe he meant for us to have the internal resources to meet the necessity of the changing moment." "This can only be accomplished with trained muscular sensitivity," Barrows adds.

5. *No pain, no gain.*

Feldenkrais emphasizes only movements that are comfortable. When something starts hurting, the teaching is to stop doing it.

As with other movement modalities like yoga, Alexander Technique and tai chi, body awareness, flexibility and resilience tie everything together.

After several weeks of Feldenkrais treatments and classes, my shoulder and hip are noticeably -- though not dramatically -- improved. I'm moving more freely and -- dare this born-

and-bred skeptical New Yorker say it? --enjoying a greater overall sense of well being and connectedness. Placebo effect? Power of suggestion? Maybe, but I'm giving long odds that this is for real.

I asked a *very* skeptical New York friend whether all this sounded a bit woo woo. He told me his son -- whose various physical, mental and emotional pains had grown so severe they nearly led to suicide -- tried a plethora of treatments, to no avail. My friend didn't understand it and couldn't explain why the Feldenkrais Method turned things around and helped save his son's life. He just knew that it did.

If this is placebo, I'll take two.

Resources:

<http://www.feldenkraisguild.com>

<http://www.feldenkraisinstitute.com/>

http://feldenkraisinstitute.com/about_feldenkrais/videos_articles_press

http://www.normandoidge.com/normandoidge/ABOUT_THE_BOOK.html

<http://www.feldenkraisinstitute.org/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=at77oeE16-Q>

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