

Felden **what?**

Have you learnt to live with back, knee or joint pain? Are you frustrated by not being able to do things you once could, because of an injury or illness? Or maybe you want to be a better problem-solver? The Feldenkrais technique can help with all this, says *Kate Johnston*.

At the age of 17, Francesca White fell head first from an attic down some stairs. "I was so lucky not to end up paraplegic," she says. "It left me with a terrible neck and crippling migraines. It wasn't until a physiotherapist told me about Feldenkrais that I ever had any hope to be free of pain. I went to an 'Awareness Through Movement' class and it totally blew me away."

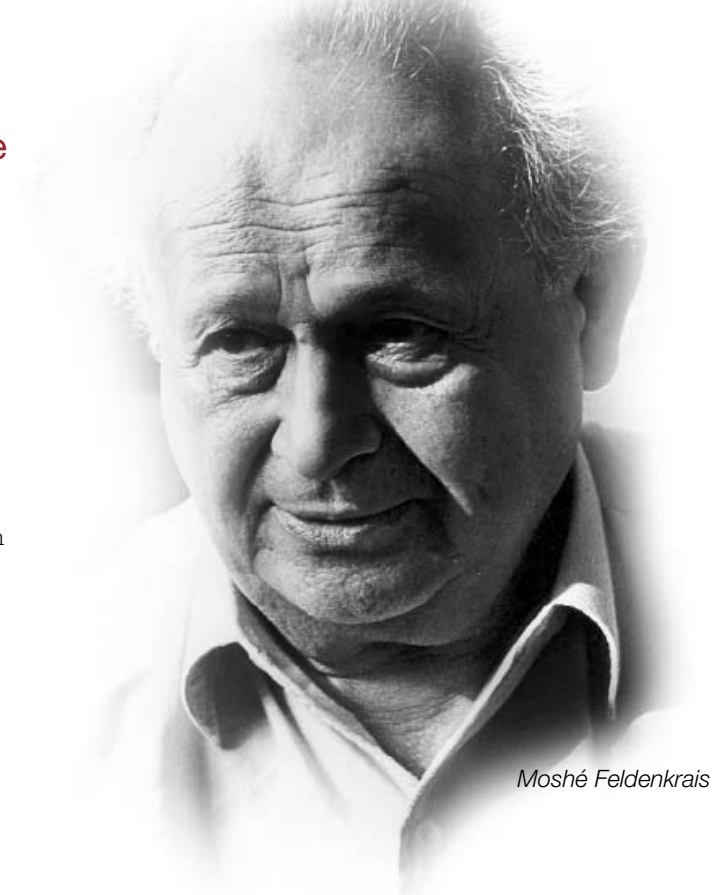
A few years later Francesca trained as a Feldenkrais (pictured right) practitioner and ever since has worked with a wide range of people in private, hands-on sessions (called Functional Integration) as well as taking group classes. "I see a lot of people before they have a hip replacement," she says. "After the surgery, the physiotherapists and doctors are amazed at how quickly these people are able to walk confidently. I get quite a few referrals from doctors now."

"I've had some falls in the last 10 years and I've never hurt myself. If you learn how to move like this, you will recover very quickly, not just from injury, but from the chaos that enters your life. You learn there is more than one way of doing something. You have this sense of 'I know there's a way out here!'"

What is Feldenkrais?

Feldenkrais is a subtle but powerful movement technique that leaves you with a greater range and efficiency of movement and a feeling that more is possible in your life.

In a Feldenkrais session, each movement is broken down and recreated again. By bringing your attention to what you are doing at each step, you learn *how* you currently do things. The technique recognises that, because you move in your own unique way, only you can learn to bypass your pain and find a more comfortable and pleasurable approach.



Moshé Feldenkrais

"Moshé Feldenkrais was big on the idea that when you know what you are doing, you can do what you want," says Francesca. "The human nervous system can be taught how to do things differently. Take a function such as bending forward to do your shoelaces up. If something happens to your back, then you have to find another way to perform this simple, daily function."

Feldenkrais is great for...

- joint pain
- spinal pain or injuries
- knee or hip problems
- chronic fatigue syndrome or immune-related disorders
- pre-surgery preparation
- stroke victims
- cerebral palsy sufferers
- sleep disorders
- anyone who wants to improve their performance, problem-solving skills or quality of life.



Who was Feldenkrais?

Born in 1904 in what is today the Ukrainian Republic, Moshé Feldenkrais emigrated to Palestine as a young man before studying and working in Paris in the 1930s. He was an engineer and a physicist who also became the first European to gain a black belt in judo. "But it wasn't until he damaged his knee in a soccer game that he started to rethink the whole idea of human movement," says Francesca.

Built into the Feldenkrais technique is the principle of less is more. "How to do things without effort is very important," says Francesca. "That really came from Moshé's engineering background. Engineers ask, how can you get the maximum amount of movement with the minimum amount of effort?"

In Feldenkrais, this means you stop the moment you feel any pain and look for a pain-free way of moving. "Pain is there for a very good reason," says Francesca. "It's a signal saying 'Stop doing what you're doing in that way'. We keep ignoring pain. Look at TV ads where people are encouraged to soldier on through colds and flu by medicating themselves. What does that say about our society? We've all been to schools where they say 'if only you'd tried harder you'd be a better person or a better student'. And you've been trying so hard you've gone in the other direction. It's not about trying harder, it's about trying differently or just mucking around with something until you stumble on this fantastic new way of doing something, like babies do when they first learn to move. Moshé spent a lot of time studying how babies teach themselves quite complex movements. Feldenkrais is a wonderful help with problem solving."

Creature of habit

Over the years, people naturally develop movement habits. "Some habits are OK and some create dysfunction," says Francesca. "We can learn to recognise our habits. By taking baby steps, you can stop when you realise you were just about to do something that would have got in the way of what you really want to do. Then you make the metaphor and say, 'that's interesting because I do that with my life as well. I hurry through things and I miss the point and then I have to go back and correct it'."

The Feldenkrais path is one of self-care – achievement through ease. In our society, if we reach a goal easily, we often feel it hasn't been earned. The struggle is what proves our worth to others. "We've been trained to think struggling builds a strong character, and often it only makes us sad and resentful and bitter," says Francesca.

"I don't think we're entitled to have an easy life, but I see a lot of people struggling in a life that does not necessarily have to be that difficult. There is a strong streak of the martyr in all of us. We are 'people pleasers'. It's much more important to please other people in case they think badly of us, or may not love us. But through learning how to take care of yourself it becomes easier and easier to live a life that's authentically yours."

Clearly the benefits of Feldenkrais go beyond reducing pain. Through Feldenkrais you can rediscover the joy of finding your own way to do what you want to do. And as your only aim in Feldenkrais is to find the most satisfying and pleasurable way, it's fun! After only a single session, you can find yourself with a fresh outlook on life and more energy.

"People often say, 'My God, I never knew that about myself'," says Francesca. "So already there's a healthy curiosity. It's just so fascinating for people to have these moments of discovery, especially adults who maybe think they've reached their maximum potential. Moshé at the age of 80 was still doing judo, moving like a 27-year-old man. He was graceful, light, exquisite to watch. It doesn't matter how old you are, you can learn how to move differently. You can try different ways." **YL**

→ MORE

Francesca White is a Melbourne-based Feldenkrais practitioner who also works elsewhere in Australia and in Europe and North America. She offers private sessions, group classes and CDs which help people apply Feldenkrais in a practical way to their everyday lives. Ph (03) 489 7006
Web www.practicalfeldenkrais.com

The Australian Feldenkrais Guild's website is full of resources and information: find a practitioner, read more about the Feldenkrais technique or check out the professional training programs.
Web www.feldenkrais.org.au