

Lessons to move you

Gentle exercise can help us to re-learn how to move naturally to combat stress and tension, -
Sylvia Thompson



Photograph: Brenda Fitzsimons

IN THIS era of global culture, an increasing number of holistic approaches to health find their way to Ireland. And so it is with the Feldenkrais Method, a system of gentle movement exercises which is popular throughout the world, particularly in central and northern European countries.

Until two years ago, German-born Sabine Volkmann was the only teacher of the Feldenkrais Method in Ireland. Now, there are about five teachers working here and another three in training. "It is still not widely known in Ireland, but the results are so good that more and more people are hearing about it," says Volkmann.

Somewhat similar to the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method is a system of gentle movement exercises which are taught in a class or on a one-to-one basis. The idea behind the approach is that we have developed limiting patterns of movement that cause us undue physical and mental stress and tension. By becoming aware of how our personal movements limit us, we can then re-learn more natural movements.

"It's different from exercise because in the classes we put a lot of attention on learning what patterns of movement are there and through movement, we find out what needs to be changed.

"It's as if the new posture grows from within, because the approach that encourages you to pull your shoulders back and sit upright doesn't work anyway," says Volkmann.

The Feldenkrais Method was founded by Russian-born engineer and physicist Moshe Feldenkrais, who suffered from a knee injury from playing football intensively in his youth. A suggested surgery had at the time only 50 per cent chance of success, so Feldenkrais decided instead to study the mechanics of human movement and to teach himself how to walk without pain.

"He was also a Black Belt in Judo so he developed his method from a combination of his knowledge and experience," says Mark Keogh, a Dublin-based teacher of the Feldenkrais Method who trained in Switzerland.

Moshe Feldenkrais lived and taught his approach in Israel and then later in the United States. Now there are training programmes throughout the Western world, and teachers of the Feldenkrais Method run both group classes which are called Awareness Through Movement, and one-to-one hands-on sessions called Functional Integration classes.

Stella Cignini attends group classes in the Feldenkrais Method. "I have some problems with my ankles and if I walk or stand for too long, they become painful. I have found that the Feldenkrais Method helps," she explains.

"Feldenkrais said that posture is the pause between moving in different directions. And your feelings, emotions and thinking is all connected to movement," says Keogh. "For instance, your thoughts are carried in a certain posture and your feelings change the way you walk. Unless you've got conscious control of various parts of your body, they will do their own thing. With conscious control, the effort gets distributed more easily throughout the whole system."

Many teachers of the Feldenkrais Method work with children as well as adults. American-born and Kerry-based Mary O'Brien, who trained in the approach in the US, works with babies and children. "I am currently training with Anat Bagiel, one of Moshe Feldenkrais' original students. Her work focuses on babies and children with developmental delay, cerebral palsy or those who were born prematurely," she explains.

"I have worked with children aged between 10 months and two years and have seen how the approach helps them learn to track with their eyes, roll and turn over," says O'Brien.

Sonia Gamble is a qualified physiotherapist who has also just completed a degree in drama. She regularly goes to classes in the Feldenkrais Method. "In my work as a physiotherapist, I find that a large number of clients' problems such as repetitive strain injuries are related to their posture.

"Correcting posture is difficult without awareness and the Feldenkrais Method has helped me give guidance to people to help them become aware of postural problems," she explains.

"In acting, being more aware of your body and movement is important for creating characters. So, I find the approach helps me know my own habits to help me work out whether to use or remove them to create a character," she adds.

Feldenkrais: the facts

What is it? The Feldenkrais (pronounced fel-den-krice) Method is a system of gentle movement exercises which increases body awareness and thus helps to relieve tension, pain and stress.

What are its origins? It was founded by Russian-born, Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984) who believed that improving movement is the most direct way of improving quality of life

What problems can it help? The Feldenkrais Method helps to improve posture and general body co-ordination. It is beneficial for sufferers of chronic pain and people who suffer from multiple sclerosis or who have had a stroke have found classes in the method can help restore functional movement

Are there any contra-indications? The Feldenkrais Method is not a therapy as such, but a form of re-training the body. Any undiagnosed pain or injury should be first diagnosed by medical practitioners

How can I find out more?

There are currently about five teachers of the Feldenkrais Method in Ireland.

Three of these run Awareness through Movement classes at various venues in Dublin.

They also offer one-to-one hands-on sessions which are called Functional Integration classes.

See www.ascendant.ie/feldenkrais for list of teachers in Ireland

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