

The 'no gain without pain' philosophy has had its day. Exercise without hardship is today's choice

Give exercise the gentle treatment



The gentle approach to exercise works better in the long haul of life, and the Feldenkrais Method embraces that approach, writes **Sylvia Thompson**



Sabine Volkmann practises the Feldenkrais Method. The technique has a following among musicians, dancers, actors and other artists who either need to have keen body awareness and flexibility or have to hold their bodies in certain positions for long periods of time. Photograph: Bryan O'Brien

More and more people are turning to gentle forms of exercise in the belief that they can be just as effective and perhaps even more beneficial in the long term than rigorous routines which place an emphasis on stamina and strength.

The huge upsurge of interest in yoga classes and the development of t'ai chi clubs for older people is evidence of this trend.

Now, another form of gentle movement exercise is gaining popularity in Ireland, years after it has been established in the United States, Germany and other mainland European countries.

Known as the Feldenkrais Method, it is practised in groups or in a more therapeutic one-to-one context with a Feldenkrais practitioner.

"The Feldenkrais Method is neither a therapy nor a treatment. It is a form of re-education which teaches the body how to move more intelligently," says Sabine Volkmann, a German practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method, based in Ireland.

"Very often, we have patterns of movement which are limiting and, in some cases, lead to chronic pain," she says.

In principle, the method teaches people how to move with ease and less effort through different sequences of exploratory movements. The focus is that of "less is

more" rather than "no pain, no gain" and most of the movements are done while lying on the floor.

"It's non-competitive, the movements are very subtle and not difficult to do," says Cliona Farrell (55)

who attends group classes in the Feldenkrais Method.

"And there is no right or wrong way of doing the movements which makes a huge difference in your attitude towards the classes. "Also, I find the exercises are quite unusual and it can feel a bit strange but that is how it gets your mind going. The classes have made my body and mind more agile," Farrell adds.

The central idea behind the Feldenkrais Method is to re-train the brain into patterns of movement which genuinely suit each individual best.

This form of central nervous system re-training has also been found to be of benefit to people with neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy and those who have had a stroke.

"In Germany, a lot of people with MS do Feldenkrais because the more you know about how you can move before you lose some ability to move, the more you can get some functional movement back again afterwards," explains Volkmann.

"Also, after someone has a stroke down one side, they can work with their good side and the brain transfers this information to the other side, giving them some movement back again."

The Feldenkrais Method also has a following among musicians, dancers, actors and other artists who either need to have keen body awareness and flexibility or have to hold their bodies in certain positions for long periods of time.

It was founded by the Russian-born physicist, judo expert and mechanical engineer, Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984), who believed improving movement was the most direct way of improving quality of life.

After first training students in Israel, Feldenkrais moved to the US in the 1970s so his approach would become better known.



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Since then, the Feldenkrais Method has been taught throughout the world and, in some cases, transformed into new exercise programmes such as the somatic education programme developed in the US by Thomas Hanna.

Volkmann believes body awareness has been something many of us have neglected at our peril.

"I think, especially in Western cultures, people have become so disconnected from their bodies. If you have a back problem, the advice is often to strengthen the back muscles but a back problem can come from a weak rib-cage.

"If you learn to have a more flexible chest, the movement in the body gets more distributed and the back gets more support.

"Strengthening muscles alone might give you brief relief from a problem but it often doesn't tackle the underlying cause," Volkmann says.

"Really, it's not about fixing something. It's about learning how to use our bodies more appropriately," she adds.

◆ For details of practitioners of the Feldenkrais Method in Ireland and Sabine Volkmann's work, see www.ascendant.ie/feldenkrais.

◆ See also www.feldenkrais.com and www.feldenkrais.co.uk