

FITNESS:

Maybe It's All In Your Mind

By Kathryn Goldman & Michael Purcell

Real evidence of increasing concern for fitness is everywhere. Jogging trails are crowded with people, even on cold and rainy days. Huge ads for new health spas fill the Sunday papers. A new cable TV network is devoted entirely to the subject of health. People who grew up on steak and potatoes are changing to diets of whole grains and fresh vegetables.

Notice, however, that these activities are directed primarily toward the physical body. The common belief today seems to be that if you get regular aerobic exercise and eat well, you will be "fit." Fitness is seen as a physical state with possible spin-off effects like "positive feelings" or "clear-headedness." Treat your body as well as you might a finely tuned race car, the metaphor goes, and you will get high performance from it.

Certainly, our bodies do need ongoing activity and care to perform well. But is it possible that this accepted model of fitness ignores several important ingredients?

A truly fit person is one who can respond creatively to the constantly changing demands of life. As Hans Selye's very important research on stress revealed, people who experience too much change in too short a time are likely to fall ill.

In this fast-paced, rapidly shrinking world, effective living generally requires the ability to make rapid decisions, interact effectively with different types of people, assimilate vast quantities of information and adapt to unexpected alterations in the economy. Such fitness calls for smoothly integrated functioning of mind and body.

Bombarded by demands, most people try to cope by learning all of the specific skills required for each area of life, be it sales, computer programming, or relationships. However, unless the individual is "basically fit," these varied demands tend to precipitate the diseases of stress.



A KIND OF "UNDERLYING GUIDANCE SYSTEM"

Our work with people of varied ages, backgrounds and levels of health suggests that we all possess a kind of "underlying guidance system." The system can be described as a meta-skill - one that is basic to all other skills, and fundamental to the ability to improve or perform in all areas of life.

Most people call it "awareness," but it is actually that and much more. We prefer to call this meta-skill High Performance Organization - it is a state of overall internal organization which allows an individual to assimilate information and carry out actions with the greatest effectiveness.

Having ourselves experienced a great many diverse approaches to both awareness training and fitness, we feel that the Feldenkrais Method is among the most effective in facilitating rapid improvements in overall somatic fitness and in developing a high performance internal organization.

To the superficial observer, Feldenkrais work might look like a series of highly unusual movements carried out under verbal direction while lying or sitting on the floor. What is unique about these non-habitual

movement sequences is that they are designed not only to increase physical flexibility, but also to use improvements in body awareness to re-program the brain.

HOW DO YOU LEARN TO MOVE?

Normally, human beings learn how to move and act in the world by mimicking parents, older siblings and friends. Inevitably, this hit-or-miss process leaves major gaps in the natural developmental sequence that is "wired-in" to each individual. Moreover, it often produces serious distortions in a person's use of himself physically. By *incorporating both physical and mental action in the same process, the Feldenkrais Method teaches a person how to alter many of the old, invisible patterns that restrict the nervous system's ability to learn.*

The human brain is extremely plastic. Current research gives evidence that the degree of inter-connection among brain cells depends on the extent to which we use a given function. By extending the range and readily available repertoire of movements, it seems that we can literally reorganize the neural pathways of the brain.

The Feldenkrais Method is based in part on the interplay of information between the motor and sensory areas of the brain which lie in close proximity on the cerebral cortex. "Data" is actually "programmed into" the motor cortex, using carefully structured non-habitual movement patterns. The brain processes this unusual information through a feedback loop to the sensory cortex, evoking the innate learning response of the nervous system. Attention and relaxed concentration are crystallized around a series of potentially easy, yet unaccustomed movements.

As the action comes closer and closer to the ideal, the participant becomes clearer and clearer about the difference between his or her typical pattern of engaging a task, and the most

natural, easy and elegant way. Inevitably, awareness and innate intelligence always win; the nervous system will naturally select the best way when all the options are clear. The individual clarifies how intention leads to action with a precision that was not there before. This is stated succinctly by Dr. Feldenkrais in his maxim: "When you know what you are doing, you can

Consistently, people find that what feels like movement education affects not only their bodies, but also changes their underlying mental/emotional "set" – their basic stance in approaching life.

What makes such results possible? Let's look at the experience of Helene, a lawyer in her forties who has put extraordinary energy into her work for years. Along the way she "somehow"



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do what you want."

A SENSE OF GREATLY INCREASED FREEDOM

What does this mean concretely? Consider the experience of these students. Tom was often bed-ridden with lower back problems for which his doctor had recommended wearing a back brace. A series of private sessions and group seminars over a period of six months have allowed him to function without the brace, which gives him a sense of greatly increased freedom in all facets of his life. For him, the work not only relaxed his lower back, but also enriched his inner life and personal relationships by teaching him "problem-solving rather than self-denial or other-denial."

Another student, Evelyn, commented that increasing the mobility in an injured and painful shoulder had given her a "fresh way of looking at myself and the things I do. It would definitely save energy and strain!"

developed severe tendonitis in both shoulders. When she began with the Feldenkrais Method, her shoulders were tight and awkward, carried high and held in, particularly while sitting at a desk. Nothing made her comfortable. Whether she was describing a recent case, her ailment, or her difficulty finding a parking space, you could sense a great effort behind it.

After a series of seminars and private sessions, she began to experience relief from her pain. Gradually, she came to see how she herself was the source of it. Little by little, she learned that her old pattern of action was anything but easy and natural. For the first time, she really was able to know what she was doing with her body and was therefore able to carry out her intentions effectively. Hence we can see that changes in body image and use can affect performance in areas that seem quite remote, such as the practice of law.

THE SECRET OF EFFECTIVE ACTION

The Feldenkrais Method has helped musicians to play better, runners to run faster, and skiers to move out of "plateaus of learning." Each improved performance has emerged from the same learning process.

In autobiographical portions of *Critical Path*, Buckminster Fuller wrote at length about the importance of precession in his own learning and in the evolutionary process of humanity. To put it simply – in most life processes, it is the spin-off, seemingly secondary, effects that are critical to survival, rather than the more obvious intended results.

The Feldenkrais Method uses this principle; it *seems* to aim at helping you fix your stiff neck or painful lower back, but it *actually* aims directly at the heart of life: the secret of effective action itself. In so doing, you experience a human version of the kind of fitness seen in a wily old lion, panther, or wild zebra – fit to live fully, whatever the threats or challenges of daily life.

That, indeed, is fitness.

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