

Playing with Your Brain

The Feldenkrais Method

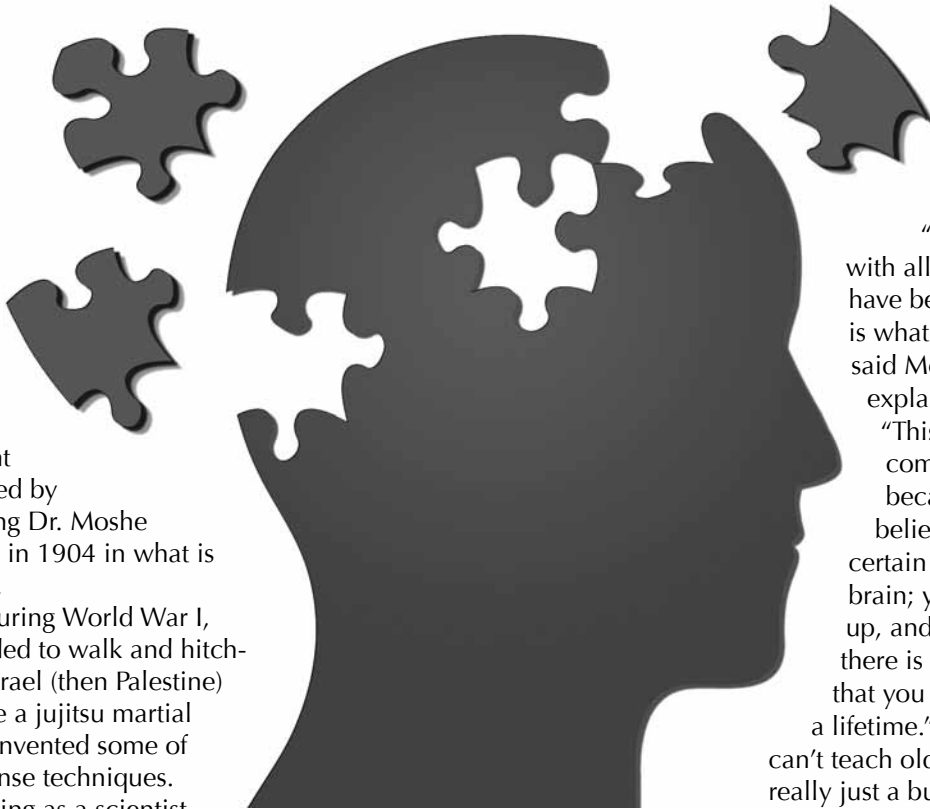
by Judi Burton

Heidi McGovern, PT, GCFP, BFLT, of North Myrtle Beach, is a very graceful 77 years young, and a teacher of the Feldenkrais Method. This is a body-movement technique invented by the very interesting Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, born in 1904 in what is now the Ukraine.

At age 13, during World War I, Feldenkrais decided to walk and hitchhike his way to Israel (then Palestine) where he became a jujitsu martial arts student and invented some of his own self-defense techniques. Later, while working as a scientist and assistant to Nobel Prize winner Irene-Joliot Curie, the daughter of Nobel Prize winner Marie Curie, he taught her judo.

During World War II, Feldenkrais fled to England and became a science officer on a submarine off the coast of Scotland where he worked on sonar technology. While on the sub, he taught self-defense to several of the other servicemen and inadvertently reaggravated a serious soccer knee injury. Told he had a 50 percent chance of recovery through surgery, he was not satisfied with the outlook and decided to figure some things out for himself.

When engaging in science experiments, one tries to keep everything the same except for one thing (a variable) and then document the differ-



ences. As a true scientist, Feldenkrais began to ask questions of his own body using the scientific method, keeping his body still and moving one small area to see what would happen. He did this over and over again, changing the movements slightly. What he found out was if you make small movements and really pay attention to your body, you can trick your nervous system into correcting the problem. This therapy, now known as the Feldenkrais Method, is practiced by people of all ages, some famous, including musician Yo Yo Ma, PGA golfer Rick Acton, actress Whoopi Goldberg, and former Israeli Prime Minister David-Ben Gurion, who studied directly under Feldenkrais and was witnessed by several of his staff doing a handstand at an advanced age.

Old Dogs, New Tricks

“It is quite clear now, with all of the brain studies that have been done, that the brain is what they call neuroplastic,” said McGovern, who patiently explained this method to me. “This is big for the scientific community and doctors, because for a long time they believed there was only a certain amount of cells in your brain; you get old and use them up, and then you die. Now, there is convincing evidence that you can go on learning for a lifetime.” So, the old adage “You can’t teach old dogs new tricks” is really just a bunch of malarkey. “One of the pieces that drives Feldenkrais’ work is curiosity,” continued McGovern. “Another title for his healing process is sensory-motor learning. It’s an avenue to get into the brain,” she said as she pointed to her shoulder, making it droop as if she had bad posture. “So, say I have an issue with my shoulder,” she continued as she moved her head slightly to the left, then her eyes, then her neck, then her eyes in a different way, then her other shoulder, and so on. They were all very small, calculated movements, which would appear to someone who didn’t know what was going on as if she were absolutely bonkers. “I’m tricking the nervous system by giving it so many different options besides the one it was used to. It says, ‘Wow, what the heck is going on here,’ and it begins to wake up to

different input. The difference is you're entering input through the sensory level, not through the thinking part of the brain. When the nervous system is open, learning can take place."

Be a Kid

Children learn much faster than older people. There are several reasons for this, one being they move so much more than we do. They practice all of the time. Their curiosity will eventually get them to the other side of the room where the other interesting thing is that they wanted to see and touch and smell and play with. Their nervous systems are open and receptive. The other reason is because they don't have the resistance of previous learning. A lot of it is unlearning.

"With the Feldenkrais Method, we want you to be a C student, because if you're an A student then you already know everything; but a C student still has something to learn," McGovern explained. "The neurophysiologists are coming out with a new law: Less is more. The brain will not make distinctions with strong, heavy movement. This makes people crazy because they always want to push harder. They want to know if they are doing it correctly. They want to make big movements." McGovern demonstrated again by putting her hand on the table palm down. "Now, I can do this movement," and she flipped her hand completely over, "this is too much. What I need to do is this," and she slightly moved her wrist just enough so that it was visible that she moved it, but not enough for her palm to leave the surface of the table.

"We ask our students to have the mindset of a scientist, where every little movement has potential for new discovery," she said "The ideal student is one who wants to learn for the joy of learning and feeling better. The first thing that is knocked out in the Feldenkrais Method is judgment. You won't get a pat on the shoulder or a look of discontent from the teacher. The typical answer you will get if you ask if you are doing it correctly is, 'You already know the answer.' It's very empowering."


Your Body Is a History Book

McGovern noticed my neck was in a strange position and asked if I have neck problems. I told her I do. She then instructed me to move my head very slowly to the right to see how far it could go without feeling pressure. We did it several times to make sure. It wouldn't move very far, less than 90 degrees from center. Then she told me to place my left hand on the right side of my neck and try it again. We did this several times, sometimes with my eyes reaching backward. There was a focus on breathing as well. I was then directed to take my hand away and try it again. Amazingly, I had a much wider range of motion with zero pressure when I moved my neck—instant results!

We did several other exercises, which were very beneficial to my posture, all very subtle. I observed that someone with very little range of motion would benefit tremendously with this technique, as it did not demand too much action. McGovern wanted to be clear that this technique is not for pain relief. "While some people may experience pain relief, the true mission is to re-educate your nervous system with awareness through movement," she explained. "The body is like a history book, and we archive events that happen to us inside. Our posture is very much like a bookmark for these events. Many people experience an emotional release when the body is given a chance to re-organize. The bookmarks are taken out. This leads to stress relief emotionally and physically, which in turn facilitates the pain relief that students' experience."

For more info on the Feldenkrais Method, visit Feldenkrais.com. To watch a YouTube video on the Feldenkrais Method, go to [Youtube/e_i5QulqcQo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5QulqcQo). For more info on private or group lessons, call Heidi McGovern, PT, GCFP, BFLT, at 843-361-8436 or email HeidiMcGov@Juno.com. You can also find more info at HeidiMcGovern.com. See ad, page 13.

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