

Learning Pleasure: Alleviating Chronic Pain with the *Feldenkrais Method*

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The following is excerpted with permission from the book: *Moving from Pain into Pleasure: Fibromyalgia and Chronic Pain* by Frank Wildman, Ph.D., G.C.F.T.

Catherine came to me complaining of chronic pain and fatigue. Her physician had diagnosed her with Fibromyalgia, and prescribed a regimen of regular exercise. Although she tried, Catherine found the stretching difficult and painful. Walks left her completely exhausted. She began to be consumed by guilt at not being able to muster the will power necessary to finish the exercises.

Then, another strategy was tried. Catherine's physician told her not to strain herself, to do only what was comfortable. But even so, Catherine found she could do very little. Her pain spread; she grew progressively weaker. Unable to perform even the most basic of activities, Catherine eventually lost her job. Besides experiencing paralyzing pain, she was confused and angry. Why was this happening to her? She hadn't had any recent injuries. Only a year before, she had been a healthy, active woman. Now her life had come to a standstill.

Pain seizes us like a claw. It makes the ordinary act of life unbearable, fills us with dread, robs us of our interests, steals our vigor, sickens our ability to enjoy being alive. Pain seems like the ultimate insult to consciousness, depriving us of our ability to explore our senses and acquire new tastes. Pain shrinks us until we feel like a shell of our former selves, and despite all that we know about the chemistry, neurology and psychology of pain, its causes remain a mystery.

Through a series of *Functional Integration*® lessons, Catherine began to learn the feeling of comfort, to move more efficiently, and even to regain organic satisfaction from simple day-to-day activities. She began to take walks again. She rediscovered how much she loved cooking and how to perform movements such as chopping, stirring, bending and lifting without experiencing pain. She was able to sleep more soundly and to find new relaxing positions in which to enjoy her favorite books. Eventually Catherine was able to return to work.

The *Feldenkrais Method* is instructive and suggestive, not corrective. Unlike western medicine, the Method goes beyond the focus on pain management. The movements can be performed alone as self-directed movement explorations (*Awareness Through Movement*® lessons for example, my tape, [Moving from Pain into Pleasure](#)). The movements are not magical tricks, yet their results can be so dramatic that they almost seem magical. What is instead required is a transformation on the part of the individual: learning to alter our attention, the expansion of our sensory perceptions, and the belief that we are entitled to feel pleasure as formidable as our pain.

Why We Hurt

Imagine the pleasure of picking up a ball in anticipation of tossing it back and forth with a friend. You toss it back and forth for a while in a casual way, without pressure or competition. You feel exhilarated and relaxed at the same time... After playing ball for a while you might give in to the pleasure of a good nap. Or just enjoy a state of deep relaxation throughout your body after having your heart beat quickly, your blood flow freely and your senses focused sharply.

Imagine, however, if you held onto that ball and didn't throw it. After several hours, the muscles would

cramp. Not only might you hurt while you were holding the ball, but if you held on in spite of painful signals, you could be sore for days afterwards. We do such things every day—not with a ball but in other ways.

The Pain Trap

What if your body is filled with a feeling of malaise and discomfort, punctuated by moments of ache or even sharp, stabbing pain? Often these kinds of sensations can become associated with a crushing cycle of fear of moving or a fear of exploring, and finally, a fear of feeling one's own body altogether. As one of my students said, "What's the point of being aware of my body if it only makes me more aware of more pain? I'd like to never think about my body again."

Escaping the Pain Trap: Using the *Feldenkrais Method*

How do we develop a sense of internal pleasure? ... First we must rediscover our ability to experience pleasure.

The first step is to learn to move in ways so gentle, so easy, and so organically pleasurable that we will want to repeat them. Learn to identify sensations besides pain. The movements must be precise, relaxed and stimulating in a way that is completely different from other forms of exercise we may know. Every day, in increments of short duration, we must get a pleasure fix and change neuromuscular habits that stiffen and pin us down. As we perform these tender movements, our pleasure centre will awaken; we will want these movements without fear. We may find ourselves saying, "I didn't know my hips and back could feel this good. What's odd is how I feel good all over. I still have some pain in my knee and ankle, but I feel so good that it seems to not be as important as before. I'm actually enjoying my body anyway."

When I first worked with Catherine, she seemed at once stiff and yet filled with lassitude. When she turned her head, she had a good range of motion, but the movements would result in pain. I observed her movements. I had her lie on her back on the table and began to gently roll her head from side to side using so little effort that she laughed at her inability to detect how her head was even moving. She then learned to move her head by herself with the same minimal effort.

I began to do the same kind of supportive, gentle movements with her shoulders, arms, torso, and eventually legs and pelvis. At the end of the first session, Catherine could turn her head without effort or consequent pain. But more than that, she had learned how to roll her body from side to side on the table which required coordinating her head, trunk and limbs.

This simple act of rolling proved to be an important movement: Catherine was now able to get her own back massage simply by rolling on the floor. In our next session I taught her several different styles of rolling until she could roll onto her stomach and back with the grace of a dancer. In order to roll, Catherine learned that she had to open her shoulder joints, use her hips and move every joint in her body.

What is revealing about Catherine's experience is that there was no attempt at focusing on pain relief. Using the *Feldenkrais Method*, Catherine and I worked on the learning process involved in improving her ability to function. In essence, Catherine was learning how to move again. She not only regained control over the pains in her body, but she learned to experience organic pleasure from ordinary movements.

Like Catherine, there comes a time when we all need to learn our way through life's pains. The task of learning to experience pleasure might seem pleasurable in itself, but for some people, it's an imposing challenge. At last there is a method to guide us through the labyrinth of sensations.

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