

Little Things Mean a Lot:

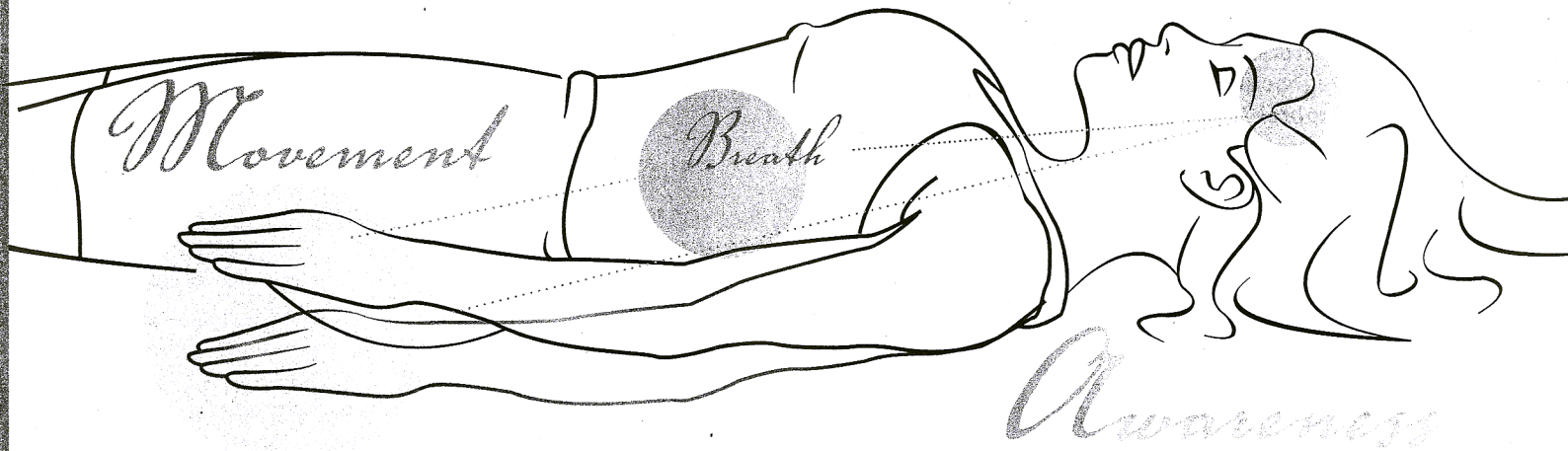
# The Feldenkrais Method & Fibromyalgia

by MaryBeth Smith

## QUICK FACT

Feldenkrais practitioners are called “teachers”; clients are called “students” rather than “patients,” and they come for a class or lesson rather than a “treatment,” “therapy,” or “adjustment.”

- After years of pain and numerous visits to many and varied medical professionals, Linda Miller\* found her way to a Feldenkrais class in the Chicago area. “The Feldenkrais movements actually felt good to practice,” she recalls. “I was able to integrate the movements into my daily life, like standing, sitting, and walking.”



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"They made a difference."

The Feldenkrais Method uses small, gentle body movements, breath, and directed attention to produce big, positive results. The Feldenkrais Method can be effective in helping people with FM find their way out of pain and fatigue, and into greater comfort and effectiveness in everyday activities. The aim of the teacher is to create individualized experiences of greater comfort, ease, fluidity, and efficiency in movement.

Individual Feldenkrais practitioners teach group classes and offer private lessons worldwide, and yet the work is not widely known. This may be because for years, the teachers have quietly been doing high quality, effective work rather than devoting time to marketing and self-promotion.

**AWARENESS THROUGH MOVEMENT** classes are a cost-effective option for those wishing to explore the Feldenkrais Method. Classes **cost \$10-25** each, depending on the venue and your location. Online sources for recorded lessons are increasingly available at low cost, and sometimes for free.

Private **FUNCTIONAL INTEGRATION** lessons range in **cost from around \$60 per hour to over \$100**, depending again on geography and the skill of the teacher. You can find teachers and classes in your area at [www.feldenkrais.com](http://www.feldenkrais.com).

It's a good idea to call a few teachers in your area and talk with them about fibromyalgia before you arrive for class. Feldenkrais teachers receive their certification after completing a four-year program under experienced trainers, many of whom worked directly with Dr. Feldenkrais. However, not all Feldenkrais teachers or trainers are prepared to work with fibromyalgia. Find a teacher who understands and demonstrates that he has the patience, interest, and imagination to work with you in a way that can be successful.

Developed by Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984) to recover from his own debilitating knee injuries, the Feldenkrais Method draws upon diverse sources such as the martial arts and yoga, anatomy and physiology, physics and engineering principles, learning theory, psychology, the human developmental sequence, and neuroscience.

Dr. Feldenkrais thought of body movement as a "programming language" for the human nervous system, and believed that certain movement patterns that were "wired in" to the brain could be "rewired," through movement, for better functioning in daily life. Recent developments in neuroscience research seem to corroborate Dr. Feldenkrais' reasoning. "Neurogenesis," the brain's ability to make new neurons, and "neuroplasticity," the brain's ability to continuously modify its inner network and the density of connections within it, seem to offer a theoretical and biological basis for the effectiveness of the Feldenkrais Method. As students direct attention to a new movement, idea, or emotion, new neural pathways are formed as a result of learning new patterns. Students are no longer stuck in patterns of pain or fatigue, because they have learned alternatives that they can use instead.

### **AWARENESS THROUGH MOVEMENT**

According to Silani Wahlgren, a Feldenkrais teacher in Ventura County, Calif., one way to look at fibromyalgia is that the nervous system and all of the senses are working overtime. Consequently, a Feldenkrais teacher seeks to turn down the "noise" in the nervous system by keeping stimulation to a minimum. The less input competing for attention, the more students can notice subtle changes in their own position, alignment, muscle tone, and breathing.

"I actively participate, and I decide how much I can do, or want to do," says Miller. "It's very different than having an external actor, like a therapist or personal trainer, 'working on me.'"

Rather than prescribing an inflexible regimen of exercises, the Feldenkrais Method encourages curiosity and continuous adaptation. The Feldenkrais teacher presents new and novel movements in each lesson, in addition to students' habitual patterns. Students are encouraged to use their sensations of relative comfort and ease as information about what works for them—and what doesn't. New possibilities emerge from the exploratory process, and students can learn to find ease as they work within their individual ranges of comfort and safety.

In group classes, called "Awareness Through Movement" (ATM), students hear verbal instructions and are guided to explore the movements at their own pace. Observing a class is like watching paint dry—but the inner experience is powerful and completely ✦

*Awareness*

individualized. Rather than being exhorted to do more and push themselves, following a “no pain, no gain” philosophy, students are encouraged to move slowly, gently, and easily. The lights are low, the room is quiet, and the instructor invites, rather than commands. Students learn to “do less,” to feel their way to better coordination and greater efficiency in movement. The emphasis is not to exert and exhaust, but rather to find paths of least resistance.

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Molly Hammond, a Houston-based professional musician, struggled for years with fibromyalgia. “I was just muscling my way through everything—just grit my teeth and bear it,” she says. “I’d gather up whatever strength and energy I had and bulldoze through each day. I realized that in order to keep living, moving, and doing things, I needed other ways to help and heal myself.

“Feldenkrais movements don’t take your body anywhere it doesn’t want to go. The movements are so small and gentle that it’s highly unlikely you’ll strain [yourself] or trigger a flare-up of pain.”

### FUNCTIONAL INTEGRATION

Feldenkrais lessons are also available in a one-on-one format, called Functional Integration (FI). The teacher uses non-invasive, listening touch as a way to bring the student’s attention to various parts of the body and how it moves—or doesn’t. Because the touch is gentle and specific, it does not overwhelm the nervous system with too much stimulation. As students become more aware of what they are doing, then they can learn to make changes that benefit them.

“The Feldenkrais Method is exploratory and open—just notice what you notice, and feel what you feel. You can learn to accept whatever you find, and go from there,” says Hammond. “It’s ... not about doing things in a right way or a wrong way, but simply finding what is best for you.

“The Feldenkrais approach seems so counter-intuitive—I actually discovered greater mobility and range of motion by working with concepts of ease, softness, and using less effort.”

The overall aim is to transfer the new patterns of moving, thinking, feeling, and sensing from the lesson into daily life. “The moments of sliding into sleep and just before fully waking are often the only moments in the day when the juggernaut of a nervous system

on overdrive is not overwhelming the other systems. It’s important to teach the student how to move within and extend these moments, because these may be the only seconds, or minutes, during waking consciousness where there is any sense of ease,” says Walhgren.

“There are whole series of tiny movements you can teach the student which will eventually lead to getting out of bed in the morning, or to falling asleep at night. These will be immensely helpful during the day in finding ease in movement. Eventually the student’s nervous system can re-learn to find ease.”

For some, it’s an adjustment to be treated as a student rather than a patient. Although the Feldenkrais Method is very gentle, it is far from passive. The “you fix me” dynamic that exists in many therapeutic relationships is absent from Feldenkrais work. You’ll be expected to pay more attention to yourself, and to apply the learning to your daily life, relationships, and environment. The challenge is to step outside of habitual ways of thinking about yourself, to question your assumptions, and to be open to the possibility for change.

Hammond believes that the Feldenkrais Method was the gateway that enabled her to move into more physical activity to support her overall health. “I was in so much pain that I wasn’t able to exercise in a traditional way, or do Pilates or anything really aerobic for my health,” she says. “Just walking wasn’t taking me to the next level. For me, the idea of forcing past the limitations just made the pain worse, which set up a lot of fear.

“In Feldenkrais classes, you learn that it’s safe to explore movements without getting hurt, and then the fear goes away. For me, Feldenkrais is at the top of the heap because it creates safety as a way to get past the fear.”

Hammond has recently become certified as a teacher of Kripalu yoga, something she never dreamed would be possible. “I’m now curious to explore even more activities, like maybe tai chi,” she says. “Feldenkrais enlarged my world.”

*\*Not her real name.*

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MaryBeth Smith

is a Feldenkrais teacher in Houston, TX.  
Learn more at [www.houfeldenkrais.com](http://www.houfeldenkrais.com)

#### Resources:

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