

# Feldenkrais Helps Patients with Chronic Pain Rethink the Way They Move



By **Rachel Zaimont**

It's a Wednesday afternoon and a dozen students are lying on their backs on yoga mats in an airy Santa Monica studio. But we're not practicing yoga poses – we're imagining that our pelvises are rooted on top of a clock.

Stacy Barrows, PT, DPT, GCFP instructs us to tip our pelvises down to 6 o'clock, then up to 12 o'clock, and then guides us through smooth, nuanced motions rolling across different sections of the clock. After each set of motions, we stretch out and rest. "Notice your contact with the floor now," she prompts. "How does your spine feel? Do you feel longer?"

This is the Feldenkrais Method of Somatic Education®. Developed over 60 years ago by physicist, engineer, and judo master Moshe Feldenkrais, the Feldenkrais Method remains an under-the-radar technique that nonetheless could help practitioners release tension and relearn how to move. Offered in private and class settings, Feldenkrais employs gentle movements to improve body function and range of motion – while allowing students to discover, at their own pace, what they are capable of.

Barrows, a licensed physical therapist for 38 years and a certified Feldenkrais practitioner for 25, has studied the effects of Feldenkrais on people living with chronic pain. "We're very incorporated in our habits, and we can habituate a lot of little, tiny movements that perpetuate pain," she says. "Feldenkrais helps you rewire the system."

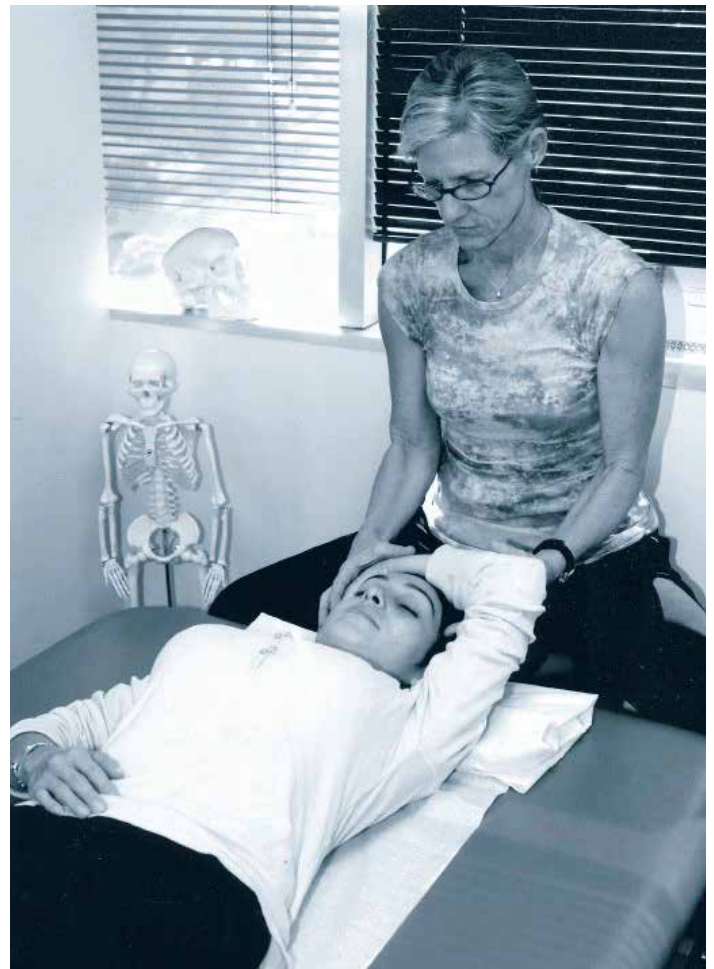
We spoke to Barrows about how Feldenkrais works, its philosophy, and how it might help those living with spondyloarthritis. Please read on to glean tips from our fascinating conversation, and to see if Feldenkrais could be beneficial for you.

**What is the Feldenkrais Method? How is it different from physical or occupational therapy, or any other movement-based treatment method?**

The Feldenkrais Method works on improving the quality of the way the nervous system works and

optimizing body function. It's about improving people's attention through their movement to accomplish something they want to do better. In a Feldenkrais lesson, you're learning from your own body – you're learning from yourself. The difference between Feldenkrais and physical or occupational therapy is that Feldenkrais doesn't try to correct you. It guides you instead in discovering for yourself the optimum, most efficient way of moving for you. There's not a lot of standardized language around somatic education. There's nothing truly like it – not yoga, not physical therapy. I feel it's an optimal tool for self-awareness.

A chiropractor or a massage therapist will do something *to* a person. A physical therapist might look at the way your head is angled and say, "You're doing that thing again! Can you stretch it? Can you strengthen the other side?" A Feldenkrais practitioner would ask questions: "Are you sitting to one side? What happens if you shift your weight?" Next thing I know, I'll see you come back to the center. We're going directly to the neural system of how we learn. You'll actually evolve the ability for you to explore your own solution to the problem.



With Feldenkrais, I don't want to do something to someone – I want to see if I can help them discover for themselves what they're doing. It's a very different intention. The instructor engages you as a student, rather than using a top-down method that tells people they're doing something wrong. If I let you be a student in your own self, with the best tools, then the “a-ha” moments are yours, and you'll be able to integrate them better.

### **Can you talk more about how Feldenkrais breaks down unconscious habits of movement?**

We're self-regulating systems. We exercise and do movements constructively, but the majority of our movements are unconscious – as they should be. If I reach for a cup, I don't want to sit there and think, “Should I use my thumb and my index finger?” My brain needs to do things at a higher level. So I'm going to use an unconscious habit of movement to accomplish this task. When you tell somebody, “Stop holding your shoulder blades that way,” they're basing it on all these particles of habit. When we go in and pave the way so that somebody can learn to modulate that movement, we're hacking the system because they'll have to relearn that pattern. And maybe they'll learn it in a way that might be better, that might alleviate pain. Everything is connected. In class, it may seem like you're just wiggling a toe; how does this have anything to do with how I'm going to walk? But by the end of the lesson, you're recognizing a relationship that you hadn't noticed before.

### **Who can benefit from Feldenkrais?**

Everybody, at any age. This is not a curative thing; it's basically trying to help people move better. I like that we're improving function rather than simply getting away from pain. If we guide people to improve function, they reduce the things that hinder it. Decreasing pain is different from improving function. A huge element of what we tackle is body awareness. Not, “Where is the pain? Is it better or worse?” That's not effectively helpful, in my opinion. But, “Was it easier to take a step?” You build off what works. I'm engaging the student to look upward and forward, as opposed to, “I'm wrong and I'm broken.” We're catalyzing the system to do what it's supposed to do more efficiently.



### **How does Feldenkrais work, in practice?**

There are two modes of this work: Awareness Through Movement®, in which I'm directing you through guided sequencing, and Functional Integration®, which often is done through touch.

In a private lesson, a student will get the hands-on, Functional Integration part. I'm teaching them to integrate something that's been missing in their function. Through a process, the student and I together, through touch, would find where they don't have a picture of their whole body. You want to integrate their whole self into action, toward what they want to do. What happens along the way is they get pain reduction, they like the postural effects, they feel more resilient.

In my class, I do Awareness Through Movement. I first set certain conditions. One: Take care of yourself. You never have to go into pain. When you need to, imagine a movement. It is just as valuable. Two: Do things very slowly. It takes time to be able to interpret through sensation what is going on. As the instructor, I'll be guiding your attention. Three: The smaller the movement, the higher the quality of sensation and the higher the sensitivity. (Think about hearing. If somebody starts whispering, you have to lean in and the attention centers in your nervous system and brain are working to tune out all other stimuli. That's what you're doing with your whole body.) In the class format, everyone can come in at their own level. You're not competitive with yourself or competitive with anybody else. You're not trying to model a form. When you're challenged with a concept, that's an opportunity to see if you can find your own solution.

In a one-on-one situation, people often come to me because they have pain. What will surprise them is how small movements we do together will still have value to them. The first thing I do is give them, in their biologic state, a sense of safety. Second to that, I will help them discover that they can change – in the way they breathe, in the way they're functioning. I'll watch them move; I'll often have them walk. I love having the simplest strategies for them to draw on, so they can implement them easily in their daily lives. I often see people come back to my clinic and I will see radical results from one session – not because I'm that good, but because I turned the system back on them. The beauty behind it is that they are already thinking differently and developing this body awareness that they never had.

## How might Feldenkrais apply to someone living with spondyloarthritis?

I would look at what the impact of that diagnosis is to that person. What I would like to do is help them redistribute the workload through the body more efficiently, so wherever they have the biggest problem, they're not increasing the load on that area. That would also enable them to upgrade muscles they're maybe not aware of. When you give someone an alternative movement strategy to accomplish the same thing, you can create a workaround. If you have spinal fusion, what are the rest of the spinal segments doing? Certain body parts can go offline. By re-engaging them, you can learn to build up resilience.

A lot of people are very compromised by pain. Their capacity to imagine movement may be restrained because they've had such limited movement during their lives. This work can help people get out of a rut of doing something the same way. Once you start turning that awareness on and begin noticing unconscious habits, you might say, "I had no idea I was resting my arm on the armrest like that, and it has been contributing to pain." Now there is another choice.

## Can you talk more about the emotional impact of Feldenkrais?

People often come to me because it's one of the few things they haven't tried yet. Generally, when people have had a lot of medical intervention without much success, their hope has dwindled down. I try to open

them up to the possibility that there is something they're capable of that they haven't discovered yet, and there are advantages of doing something a different way. Feldenkrais gives us tools to refine our sense of ourselves – our self-image, our body image, all those elements that make us who we are. That is so empowering. That has more bang for its buck than anything else I can do.

Stacy Barrows is a Doctor of Physical Therapy, Guild certified Feldenkrais® practitioner, and PMA Pilates certified teacher. She integrates these modalities into her Los Angeles practice at Smart Somatic Solutions, Inc. She patented a foam roller for every body, the Smartroller, along with Smartroller Links and Sits, and authored a book on their use, titled, *Smartroller Guide to Optimal Movement*.

