

From Feldenkrais to FlexAware[®] :

Extending and Enhancing the Benefits of the Feldenkrais Method[®]

by Steven Shafarman, Guild-Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner

Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais taught his last public workshop in September 1981, at the Washington D.C. Hilton on Connecticut Avenue. Jogging was popular, the early fall weather ideal, and we saw scores of joggers each morning as we drove through Rock Creek Park. “They *think* they’re doing themselves some good,” Moshe stated, with obvious emphasis on *think*, then describing the damage people were inflicting to their knees, backs, shoulders, and overall. His final comment, “cardiovascular masturbation.”

A week later Moshe asked me to travel with him to Florida for the taping of a cable TV program, *The Medicine Man*. The studio was owned by Nautilus, the exercise machine company, and two doctors gave us a tour of their research facility. Of course Moshe wanted to see someone using the machines. “Steven, get on that one.” As I performed the first exercise, he noted that my trunk was supported and stable, and the doctors named the shoulder muscles it was designed to target.

While I used a second machine, Moshe spoke about the problems with targeting individual muscles. Nautilus is a whole body exercise, the doctors explained, because it works all the muscles when people use all the machines. The third machine had me lifting my knees toward my chest, working the hip flexors. “Do too many repetitions with that one,” Moshe said, “and you’ll be an impotent man.” I stopped. So did our tour.

When people told him they did yoga and asked for his opinion, he sometimes responded, “You’re ruining your hip joints.” That was not merely arrogance. He knew the science and theory of yoga, and he’d seen many ruined hip joints.

Every movement involves all of our muscles, Moshe taught; also sensing, feeling, and thinking. That’s why he was so critical of standard exercises. When we target specific muscles or other parts of the body, and when we focus on achieving a particular goal or posture, normally, we tend to ignore other aspects of the activity. With push-ups, for example, people are targeting their arms and shoulders while, unaware, conditioning rigidity throughout the trunk and hip joints. Sit-ups, curls, and crunches strengthen the abdominal muscles, but when the abs are too strong, the pelvis is constrained and breathing is impaired. Yoga and Pilates, in most varieties, are very goal-oriented and specific about the postures.

In the late ’80s and into the ’90s, increasing numbers of people were joining health clubs, and I saw a corresponding increase in people seeking relief from exercise-related pain. Most of my students improved quickly with Feldenkrais lessons, though setbacks were common when they resumed their workouts. Yet many people told me they wanted or needed a regular fitness practice. Some insisted on exercising in spite of chronic discomfort or pain.

My primary advice was, and is, to find something you enjoy. More important than what you do, in my opinion, is how you do it. While exercising:

- Actively scan and sense your whole body.
- Seek to move skillfully, efficiently, with no excess effort.
- Be especially attentive to your breathing. Sense and think about how your ribs are moving as you exhale and as you inhale.
- Exercise your curiosity along with your muscles, so it's a learning opportunity, not rote or mindless repetition. How can I be more comfortable? More skillful? More aware?

In 1997, after publishing *Awareness Heals*, my book about the Feldenkrais Method, I started to actively look for an exercise program that's fully compatible with Moshe's ideas. But I couldn't find anything, so I resolved to create it.

I began, as Moshe did, by observing and thinking about the way young children move and learn. Young children are remarkably flexible, surprisingly strong, and have immense stamina — without doing any formal exercise. That's innate. Young children move efficiently, no strain, no stiffness, no excess effort. They breathe freely, their breathing fully integrated with every movement. And they align with gravity, instead of fighting against it.

You and I were like that when we were young. So what happened? How did we lose that skill? The answer, I believe, is that we're socialized to be concerned about what people say to and about us — sit still, stop slouching, stand up straight — and through that process we learn to be relatively inattentive to our own ease and sense of comfort. We acquire habits of straining, stiffening, and holding our breath, and those habits are strengthened with push-ups, sit-ups, and similar exercises.

Over several years of exploring and experimenting, I created FlexAware, and I've been using the name since 2002. A major challenge was to teach explicitly, telling people how to move and what to sense and think about. Moshe didn't do that; I truly love him and the Method, and I acknowledge the wisdom of his approach. He was "creating conditions for learning," as distinct from teaching, encouraging us to discover for ourselves. Awareness Through Movement, as he conceived it, is mainly about awareness, using movement as the means to enhance awareness. And using awareness to rediscover and pursue our "unavowed dreams." In other words, he was a kind of zen master.

FlexAware is a true fitness practice, an alternative to push-ups, sit-ups, yoga, Pilates, cardio, stretching, and strength-training, though it's also an adjunct, a way to make those exercises healthier and more enjoyable. Every FlexAware movement strengthens weak muscles and relaxes tight ones at the same time, while mobilizing joints and tissues throughout the body. The movements can be slow, small, and effortless — that's best for learning and healing — or rapid, vigorous, and demanding for a serious workout. Yet the emphasis, always, is on becoming more aware and skillful; other goals are secondary.

In FlexAware classes, people move at their own pace, in their own way, within the range of comfort while playfully expanding their range. A defining feature is the way we use breathing to direct and coordinate the movements. For example, exhale as you twist or bend, and inhale as you return to neutral. Through this breathing coordination, all of the exercises increase mobility of the ribs, spine, and breastbone; that's central to FlexAware, and a major contrast with standard exercises, which typically overlook movements within the trunk.

Our world has changed significantly since 1984, when Moshe died. Then, people used typewriters and TVs did not have remote controls, so sedentary activities required routine movement; now we sit at computers, mostly immobile. Then, few people went to gyms or health clubs; now many of us exercise while distracted by TV, music, mirrors, and such. Today, consequently, our everyday lives impose deeper divides between mental and physical activities. We are generally less aware, more stressed, and more distracted, therefore less able to gain or retain the benefits of Feldenkrais lessons.

FlexAware is, fundamentally, an awareness practice. Using exercise, it explicitly teaches people to be more aware and skillful in everyday activities, the way we breathe, sit, and walk. Students learn to breathe freely and move easily wherever we are, whatever we're doing — while sitting at a computer or on a stationary, or real, bike; while walking on a treadmill, down the street, or in our living rooms.

Moshe said he wanted his students to extend and enhance his ideas, and I believe he was sincere. If he could see what I'm doing with FlexAware, I'm confident that he'd be pleased.

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