

Ask Hedy! *On a regular basis, Hedy Ciocci, B.S.N., Administrator of the Selfhelp Home will answer some of the many questions we have around aging. Hedy specializes in dementia care, has extensive experience working with families and elderly patients, and is a registered nurse. She is a frequent lecturer on issues of aging.*

Recently, Hedy interviewed Myra Ping, Physical Therapist and certified Feldenkrais instructor. The Feldenkrais Method was originated by Dr. Moshé Feldenkrais (1904-1984), a Ukrainian-born Jewish physicist and judo practitioner who moved to Israel. He presented a view that good health means functioning well. He asserted that his method of body/mind exploration leads to improved health by helping individuals become more aware of their movements and finding improved functional abilities. Most proponents of the Feldenkrais Method consider it to be a form of self-education and mind-body development, rather than a manipulative therapy.



Hedy Ciocci

Using the Feldenkrais Method to Feel Stronger and Better

Q: The Feldenkrais Method can be taught to people of any age. How does it differ from other exercise methods like Tai Chi, for instance?

A: The Feldenkrais Method can be taught to anyone with any level of ability. The focus is on how a person moves. Feldenkrais does not focus on the muscles, but rather on your bones, as this is how your body is supported. It teaches you how to support yourself more efficiently and you learn new ways to get your body to move more effectively. It has a focus similar to Tai Chi, and the goal is to improve your balance, comfort, movement, ability and posture.

Q: Is this something you do every day?

A: It isn't something you have to do every day, but it is a great way to get warmed up in the morning or calmed down at night. When we move more efficiently and in a fashion like we were designed to move; the rest of our physiology functions the way it is supposed to. Over time, certain stresses, like work stress or emotional stress, cause us to move in a more restricted way than when we were younger. It is possible to peel away some of those layers of stress and the restrictions we put upon ourselves so that we feel more graceful and in control.

Q: Once you learn the techniques, is this something you can do in your own home by yourself?

A: Yes, I work with many seniors and I teach them techniques that are tailored to work with their individual issues and capabilities. It is more fun to do this in a group and I think it is more motivating. Practice will help you move more efficiently. Just like learning to play an instrument, the more you do it, the more you are able to improve and see the results.

Q: How long does a session take?

A: Our group lessons tend to last about 45 minutes. However, you could do this in 20 minutes a day or a half hour. Instructors incorporate different ideas and it is the group that directs you in one way or another, depending upon their needs and issues.

Q: What if the senior has physical limitations, such as someone who has had a stroke or is wheelchair bound – can you work with them?

A: The lessons are tailored to individual needs and capabilities. We call these "lessons" as opposed to exercises, because the person is supposed to pay attention and learn something from this. There's a Hebrew word, Kavanah, which means to pray with focus, attention and intention. I think that this really relates to what I am talking about as well. If you are doing something with "Kavanah," and you are paying close attention, then you will learn what is the right way for you. If you do things in just one way, you can hurt yourself more than help yourself. The idea behind the Feldenkrais Method is that the fastest way to make a positive change in your life is to apply movement in ways for which your body was designed and re-introduce movement you may have forgotten.

I don't believe that health issues at an advanced age should rule out learning new techniques or skills to remain healthy. There's always something, no matter how small, that we can do in order to continue moving. Enhancing any level of movement, even if it is just breathing, is a healthy thing to do and it will help a person feel better. The regularity of movement and exercise is the most important thing with regard to overall health.

Q: How important is balance, and how do you focus in on this as opposed to movement?

A: We exercise to maintain flexibility, build strength and endurance. The fourth category to address as we get older, is to exercise for maintenance and improvement of balance. There are specific things you can do to improve and maintain your balance. Even if you are wheelchair bound, balance is important when changing positions. One of the most important aspects of balance is to keep moving, because the less we move, the less our body will thrive. The more still we become, the more difficult it is to stay balanced, flexible and strong.

Q: Is this a treatment or technique that can be reimbursed by Medicare or private insurance?

A: Insurance companies only pay individuals who are licensed by the state. There are physical, occupational and speech therapists that practice the Feldenkrais Method and those costs are reimbursable. There are many great practitioners around the world who don't have a license and it is much more difficult to obtain reimbursement in that situations.

Q: How much does it cost to learn the Feldenkrais Method?

A: I offer a senior rate of \$75.00 for a one-on-one session. In a group class, it is typically \$15 per class and the class lasts for an hour and a half. I usually offer classes in a series.

Q: Are there exercises that can be done sitting down or lying in bed that are worthwhile?

A: Certainly – almost anything can be adapted. I work on movement with the idea of finding out what function is important to the person. Some examples include lifting, reaching, pulling, or carrying something. There are movements you can make from a sitting position that will help with these everyday functions.

Q: What can a 90-year-old expect from doing some form of exercise and how will this person be rewarded for their efforts?

A: Feeling good and having energy, as well as having less stress, are just a few of the benefits older people can expect to see when they exercise regularly. People are more alert when they exercise and it really is a case of "use it or lose it." There are numerous ways to keep your body healthy and integrated, which certainly improves brain function as well.

Q: Is Feldenkrais more popular in this country or elsewhere?

A: There are trainers around the world. There are many instructors in Germany and Israel and there are about 2,000 – 3,000 practitioners in the United States. The word is definitely getting out and it is becoming more popular.