

How to Perform Feldenkrais Movement Lessons

Awareness Through Movement (ATM) Lessons

Awareness Through Movement is the “do-it-yourself” aspect of the Feldenkrais Method. It uses a combination of gentle movement and relaxed attention to engage your brain’s neuroplasticity on your body’s behalf. Awareness Through Movement can begin making a positive difference right away.

Start each lesson with a “quiet mind and kind heart” (feeling kind towards yourself). Wear loose, comfortable clothing, and take the time you need as you move (and rest) to be as comfortable as possible. In many other fitness classes (and in many aspects of our lives) we use “no pain, no gain” to pursue self-improvement, *Feldenkrais* is different and works by activating your brain’s natural most efficient means of learning new movement patterns.

This learning process can only be maximized if you are at ease as you move and notice/sense yourself. Any movements that increase pain or discomfort will become a distraction, as they mobilize your nervous system for self-protection instead of learning and draw your attention away from sensing the new information that will benefit you the most.

All movements, large and small, are done in a pleasant, exploratory way, so you find how to unlock your own best self-use in class and in life. This differs from “performing” a movement the “right” way, regardless of how it feels, as happens in many other types of fitness classes. Direct your attention to particular things you will feel as you move, and this is the key to positive change: your sensations are actually more important for enhancing how you move – both during and after class – than the movements themselves.

Before You Begin

Turn off distracting electronics and find a place where you can do the exercises comfortably. Remove your shoes and loosen any tight or restrictive clothing. If you are doing an ATM lesson that involves a sitting position, please select a chair with a flat, firm seat, and sit toward its forward edge. Your feet should be able to rest flat on the floor.

What to Expect

Awareness Through Movement lessons work in an unusual way. Instead of using muscular effort, they rely upon small, gentle movements done in a relaxed way to facilitate communication between your brain and body. They are most effective when you go slowly, do less, avoid discomfort, and respect your own internal senses. When the lesson is over, you may notice that changes have taken place in your posture, ease and quality of movement, and overall sense of well-being. Some improvements will be immediate while others will occur gradually over time, as you continue to explore the Feldenkrais Method.

Don't be Hard on Yourself

Do not attempt to 'correct' your body in any way, and don't compare your movements to the movements of other people. For optimal results, don't let yourself get caught in making an effort to succeed because emotional effort makes us use more muscular effort than necessary. Give yourself permission to take a break from being goal oriented. Simply relax and experience the lesson without judging yourself. The Feldenkrais Method is not competitive; no one is better at doing a Feldenkrais lesson than anyone else.

Do Each Movement Slowly

Go slowly and take your time to sense and feel the details of each movement. Doing the movements slowly will make it easier to reduce unnecessary muscular effort and strain. It will also make it easier for your brain to explore new options for improvement. Going slowly helps to make important sensory information more accessible to your brain, so that it can use it to your body's advantage to help improve movement.

Reduce Unnecessary Effort

In everyday life it is extremely common to use more muscular effort than necessary, even in simple movements and tasks. When you're doing a Feldenkrais lesson, try to use as little effort as possible when you do the movements. Use only the small amount of muscular effort that is truly necessary. If you find something challenging, then reduce by making the movement smaller/slower. This will make it easier for your brain to detect small but important differences and make helpful neurological distinctions.

Do Only What is Easy

In Awareness Through Movement, each movement should be easy and comfortable. Do not push, stretch, strain, or use intense muscular effort, and please do not do any movements that cause pain or discomfort. Movements of only an inch or two can be extremely effective. Do not do any movements that cause discomfort.

Leave "autopilot" behind.

ATM movements have little to no value when you're not noticing them, so try not to repeat movements by rote. Feeling bored of a movement? Sense around your whole body; you'll probably quickly find a sensation you weren't aware of. How is it related to the current movement? Or rest your attention and pause or ignore the lesson for a few moments – you might simply need a break!

Pause Between Each Small Movement

Do not repeat the movements quickly, one after another. It is more effective to pause and relax completely for a few seconds between each movement. This will help you to stay relaxed and gives your brain time to absorb new and useful sensory information.

Resting is Important

Fatigue increases muscular effort and interferes with your brain's ability to communicate successfully with your body. Therefore, rest as often as you like during a Feldenkrais lesson. Resting can be as helpful as doing the movements, refreshing your system, and giving you an opportunity to notice the changes that are taking place.

Go at Your Own Pace

Feldenkrais lessons are flexible and all about you as an individual. Therefore, please take your time and go at your own pace. If you find some movements particularly interesting, feel free to pause and do them as many times as you like. If you feel any strain or fatigue, please pause to rest, and resume the exercise when you are ready to continue.

Breathe, Relax, and Take Your Time.

The lessons are designed to prompt neuroplastic changes in your brain, rewiring habits of movement to create more effective and pleasurable movement/actions. The Feldenkrais Method harnesses the natural human learning process, in which there is no value for hurried action.

Avoid Pain and Discomfort

You should not experience discomfort or pain while doing Awareness Through Movement. Respect your body's signals and do not do any movements that cause pain or discomfort. Instead, try making the movements even smaller and slower, or do them only in your imagination. Discomfort after a Feldenkrais lesson may indicate that you used more muscular effort than necessary. Please rest and try doing even less next time.

Visualization

When you imagine or visualize doing a movement, your brain sends the same exact messages to your muscles that it sends when you are actually moving. The only difference is that the messages are not intense enough to make your muscles contract fully. If you like, try closing your eyes and doing the movements in your imagination only. In some situations, this can be as effective as physically doing the movements.

Exercise your curiosity, improve your comfort, and cultivate your fascination with yourself.

The Feldenkrais Method is designed to teach you how to learn from yourself by attending much more closely than usual to your experience, noticing and refining your behaviour based on your increasing awareness. You can pause any time to rest or to play more with movements you are particularly enjoying.

What to do When the Lesson is Over: How to Maximize the Benefits

When you do an Awareness Through Movement lesson, some of your old, habitual patterns become flexible, and your brain and body has an opportunity to access new more flexible options for your posture, movement. When the lesson is over, you may notice things have changed. There could be all sorts of improvements in your posture, ease, range of movement, breathing, and sense of well-being. To enjoy the fullest rewards, when the lesson is over, take some time to notice the changes that have taken place. Your awareness in the hours immediately following a Feldenkrais lesson is a powerful time and can help to maximize the lesson's effectiveness by helping your nervous system support the new movements/sensations.

But those pathways are new and unfamiliar! Any new learning is fragile after a lifetime of sensing, moving, feeling, and thinking in particular, habitual ways. New learning needs safety, nurturing, and time to become integrated. If you stand up after doing a Feldenkrais lesson and immediately grab your mobile phone, you will miss the potent minutes--and hours-- when the new neurological information is richest, and the lesson's effects are easiest to feel and integrate. The more you let the new learning 'soak in,' the more likely it will become integrated into your daily life.

After doing a Feldenkrais lesson, pay attention to yourself in a relaxed, non-critical way. You can support the new learning and improvements that have taken place by resting or going for a relaxed walk. Check in with yourself occasionally to notice changes in the way you move, breathe, think, and feel. The benefits of a Feldenkrais exercise may be diminished if you go immediately into a stressful situation in which you are unable to pay attention to yourself.

You can do Awareness Through Movement as often as you like. Ideally, take a break of at least one hour between each lesson so your brain and body have time to absorb and integrate the new learning. If you do them consistently you will enjoy a process of steady improvement.

As you "learn how to learn" in an ATM study context you'll also become more sensitive and responsive to your day-to-day sensations of movement. Feldenkrais students often quickly discover quality of life improvements in everyday activities as the ATM principles and lesson experiences become part of regular life. You can also revisit any particular movement you found interesting and noticed was beneficial, spend a few minutes "playing" with the new experience. Checking in with yourself occasionally will put you on a path of steady improvement and self-discovery.

Have a wonderful day and take the time to explore the different possibilities in your thinking and movement, helping you to enjoy the new you!

Kindest Regards

Wayne 😊