

fitness

## What is Feldenkrais?

"The Feldenkrais Method explores the biological and cultural aspects of movement and posture, and how habitual ways of moving, feeling, and acting can constrain us to a small portion of our potential. Through our personal history, upbringing, culture, injuries, illness, etc., we each adopt patterns of physical and psychological behavior. These patterns are deeply embedded in our nervous system, and often become outmoded or dysfunctional, creating unnecessary physical and psychological limitations. The Feldenkrais Method uses organic learning, movement and sensing to free us from habitual patterns and allow for new patterns of thinking, moving and feeling to emerge."

— The Feldenkrais Institute, [www.feldenkraisinstitute.com](http://www.feldenkraisinstitute.com)

Bonnie Kissam teaches Feldenkrais to Bonnie Heinz, left, Mary Elizabeth Page and Mary Ellen Renaud.



PHOTO / CRAIG LITTEN

# Finding freedom in movement

By MARE PETRAS

*"The aim is to make the impossible possible, the possible easy and the easy elegant."*

—Moshé Feldenkrais

Most of us learned to walk between the ages of 9 and 15 months.

"It's easy," we were told. "Just put one foot in front of the other."

Walking is something that we do naturally, without a lot of thought. But what if, with a little extra thought and subtle exploration, walking could be made easier, more efficient and even elegant.

Sarasota Feldenkrais practitioner Bonnie Kissam believes

we can learn a lot about proper walking technique from our four-legged friends.

"Most people think of primarily using the legs while walking. The more we use our upper torso, the less the legs have to work, the lighter the walk, the more fun it is. Walking should be like a dance — pure pleasure."

Kissam, who has a master's degree in physical education and dance, observes that "many people sit all day, get up to walk, feel a kink and then avoid the pain by transferring the workload to other parts of our body. When we learn to relax into our bodies and not give in to bad habits, movement becomes a natural 'organizer' for our bodies."

The Feldenkrais Method, developed by Moshé Feldenkrais, an Israeli physicist and judo master who re-educated his body to walk painlessly and efficiently after he damaged

his knee, teaches individuals to be aware of their movement patterns on a deep level, beyond the muscles, down to the bone and nerves. This heightened sense of awareness increases the enjoyment of everyday activities and decreases injury by providing a personalized tool kit of ways to move.

Bonnie Heinz, who has taken Feldenkrais classes for five years, drives 15 miles each way to take class with Kissam.

"Feldenkrais really should be taught in schools to children," says Heinz. "I wish I had been encouraged to slow down and listen to how my body moves at an earlier age."

While it's natural for children to have fun exploring movement, time-crunched adults have less patience experimenting with the best ways to move until they experience pain or their quality of life begins to diminish.

"I have tried it all," says Heinz, who has scoliosis and suffers from assorted chronic injuries, "and Feldenkrais is the only thing that keeps me pain-free and able to pursue my passion: horseback riding. I am lucky enough to be able to have my horse, Gunner, at home with me. I actually do my best riding after those exercises. Feldenkrais helps with every kind of

balance, both on the ground and off, walking included."

Heinz's stepmother, Marge Sagman, is a two-year Feldenkrais convert.

"I walk, I bike

and I do this," she says. "It's really boring, but I keep coming back because I feel great, walk lighter and my posture has improved."

Kissam admits that Feldenkrais can be tedious.

"I took my first class in 1976 and promptly fell asleep because I found it so slow and subtle," she says. "Being a former dancer, I was intrigued by all forms of movement therapy, so I kept going back. I stuck with it because I began to roll out of bed easier and generally started to feel better."

Kissam became certified and studied under the master, Moshé Feldenkrais, before he died in 1984.

Kissam describes her classes as "more meditation than movement and more movement than meditation." She has heard others describe it as tai chi on the floor.

"Feldenkrais teaches the individual 10 different ways to do one thing. It's all about possibilities," says Kissam. And, for some, there's a tremendous amount of freedom in that choice.

"It's great stuff," Heinz concludes. "I now know ways to work with my body, not against it."

— Mare Petras, a Sarasota resident and fitness professional, writes about wellness and speaks nationally to fitness groups.

## What it's like

When I attended Bonnie Kissam's class, it felt like a Montessori school for the body — a lot of freedom and choices within a boundary.

Acting more as a facilitator than an instructor, Kissam

provides a series of verbal cues and awareness-provoking questions, without demonstrating the movement:

"Raise your arm overhead. Did you notice which arm you raised? Why is that? Are you reaching straight up or did you lengthen to a diagonal? What happens if you drop your shoulder? Do you feel any pain at all in the movement? Where? Are you still breathing?"

The movement is delicate and deliberate.

I tried to connect how performing these simple little exercises sitting on a chair or lying on the floor would help me to walk better. In one class, I discovered which leg I favored standing on, a way to loosen my arm swing by rotating my torso, and that I can feel relaxed and in control at the same time.

Aha! Three small ideas that can make a big difference in a comfortable stride.

— Mare Petras



### Interested?

**Bonnie Kissam** specializes in the Lightness of Walking classes

**Cost:** \$15 a class, \$50 a month; \$85 per private lesson

**Information:** (941) 360-2248; [www.BonnieKissam.com](http://www.BonnieKissam.com)

## 5 easy Feldenkrais exercises

### Sitting relaxed in a chair ...

1. Moving from the hips, breathe and slide hands forward on thighs and breathe to come back to sitting.
2. As above, except instead of both hands, slide one hand forward on thighs and slide the other hand back. Feel, sense and know as the shoulders move with the arms, a natural rotation happens in the upper torso.
3. Cross hands across the chest and do each of the following exercise variations several times paying attention to the breath:
  - a. Turn the head to look to the right and back.
  - b. Allow the head to stay still and turn shoulders and back.
  - c. Allow the head to go in opposite direction to the arms and shoulders.
4. Slowly and deliberately turn heels in and turn heels out.
5. Soften eyes to soften neck stiffness.