

Dancers Find a Path Out of Pain with The Feldenkrais Method

by Nancy Galeota-Wozny, MA, GCFP

Is pain the inevitable part of a career in dance? Whether it's the rigors of the stage, teaching, or the extra job we need to support a career we love, pain often creeps into the picture. Some dancers are finding ways out of pain using a program of somatic reeducation known as The Feldenkrais Method.

It's 1992 and Barbara Forbes, ballet mistress of The Joffrey Ballet, is about to teach company class. Unfortunately, her back has gone out due to a painful spasm. Her breathing is strained and she finds it difficult to move her head in any direction. Although Forbes's performing career is over by this time, the demands of teaching have taken a second toll on her body.

"I anticipate an old familiar pattern," she wrote for a Feldenkrais Newsletter. "Three days of painful, restricted movement, and another three or four days for the spasm to gradually ease." She sits gloomily in the green room when a flyer on the bulletin board with the questions "Chronic Pain?" catches her attention. The flyer leads her to Alice Brydges, a dancer and student of the Feldenkrais Method. Forbes wastes no time in contacting Brydges, who proceeds to lead her through a series of small, gentle movements known as an Awareness Through Movement® (ATM) lesson. When Forbes stands up, she notices she is breathing more easily and can hold her head up again. The spasm seems to have lost its bite.

Developed by physicist, engineer, and martial artist Moshe Feldenkrais from

the 1940's to his death in the 1980's, the Method enlists subtle and often non-habitual movement patterns to develop attention to the ways habits contribute to discomfort. These gentle movements bring forth options for new movement. The technique's focus is not so much on learning how to move but on neutralizing the patterns that prevent us from moving fully.

The two modalities of the Feldenkrais Method, Awareness Through Movement® (group movement lessons), and Functional Integration® (hands-on and one-on-one guided movement), offer dancers education that can help them turn pain around, continue dancing, and reestablish their love of dance.

After her initial introduction to the ATM process, Forbes began taking the deceptively simple lessons regularly. "Gradually, my awareness of having twenty-four individual ribs available for movement rather than one rib cage—a completely new sensation after years of holding ballet's rigidly erect spine—released the holding pattern in my chest, which had contributed to my recurring back spasms," she wrote.

Forbes is now a Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner working with dancers at Sarah Lawrence College. By incorporating somatic principles into dance education, she's become part of a new breed of dance teacher. She now teaches a full-length ATM class immediately prior to her advanced ballet class, and she notices her students look more at ease. Tension

disappears, as do strained necks, hunched shoulders, and unnecessary work.

The Feldenkrais work enhances one's self as being alive and active," Forbes says. "My sense is that through ATM the dancer has a better sense of being fully there in each moment of dance. There is more eye contact and I begin to see my students as individuals while they are dancing." "I believe it is possible to train strong flexible, thinking dancers with far less injury than is the norm," states Priscilla Winslow Bradley, another injured dancer turned Feldenkrais practitioner. After graduating from the North Carolina School of the Arts, Bradley moved to New York to study at The Joffrey and, later, other ballet and modernjazz studios. She knows firsthand about pain.

She danced full time in two companies and suffered from chronic ankle and back pain for almost four years. After ankle surgery, she tried every therapy and method she could find. Traditional paths of floor barre and strengthening exercises only accentuated her imbalances. Finally, she began working privately with a woman who was familiar with the Feldenkrais Method. Within a matter of weeks, Bradley was back dancing and performing.

"[The Feldenkrais Method] completely changed the way I view my body and how I treat myself," Bradley says. "I also learned to deal with pains that would come and go, without panic. I discovered if I stopped what I was

doing as soon as I felt discomfort and paid attention to how I did the activity, I could vary the movement ever so slightly and usually avoid pain entirely.”

Bradlye went on to develop a six-day danceteacher intensive where she presents ATM lessons related to dance technique. Participants experience graceful pain-free movements while broadening their understanding of how dancers can achieve a desired aesthetic with less strain on the joints and muscles. In Taos, New Mexico, where she now lives, Bradley also guest teaches ballet and modern-jazz classes spiced with ATM principles.

When Cathy Paine, a professional dancer, choreographer, and teacher for more than twenty years, began experiencing stabbing pains in her right hip from early arthritis, she began receiving FI lessons. FI is performed on a low, firm table with the person fully clothed and in the most comfortable position. Unlike massage, the contact in FI is skeletal. The practitioner guides the person through a series of gentle movements, and because it's the practitioner who essentially performs the motions, she can override habits that may be getting in the way of more efficient movement.

Feldenkrais practitioners attribute success to the fact that learning takes place directly at the nervous-system level. Thus, the new information becomes automatically available to the individual in his or her everyday life. He or she doesn't have to consciously think about moving in a new way, which is very different from having a therapist tell you how to hold yourself correctly.

Paine eventually became a Feldenkrais practitioner and is now involved with exploring the connection between contact improvisation and the Feldenkrais Method. Not only does

she teach ATM classes to University of Maryland dance majors, she introduces contact improvisation concepts to Feldenkrais practitioners at conferences. In June 2002, at age 51, Paine received the Maryland State Arts Council's Individual Artist Award in dance performance for her work as a solo dance improviser.

Dancing is not the only factor that contributes to dancers' pain and injury. "Standing or walking for hours each day with habits appropriate for dance technique can cause more strain than any number of hours of actual dancing," says Bradley. "Teaching adds the additional strain of demonstration, many times on one side repeatedly and often without proper warm-up."

"What's hurting dancers is not always just the dancing, but what they have to do to dance," says Linda Phenix, artistic director of Chrysalis Dance Company in Houston. "We have dancers in their cars going all over town teaching, dancers on their feet for hours working retail, waitressing, and taking office jobs." Training in the Feldenkrais Method improves movement regardless of the activity. And as dancing gets easier, so does the rest of our lives.

Moshe Feldenkrais believed that in a life worth living there is going to be injury. The mark of a healthy person is not that she or he never gets injured but rather how quickly recovery from injury occurs.

Each of these dancers found that recovery from injury was by no means the end of the story. By ending the pain, Feldenkrais not only helped them return to their love of dancing, but also to move beyond technique, to discover the person doing the dancing. And now they're avidly spreading the word.

Nancy Galeota-Wozny, MA, CFP, is an artist and practitioner of

the Feldenkrais Method. She has presented her work throughout the United States and was a finalist for the Sommerville Award for Somatic Writing.

Training in the Feldenkrais Method includes at least 800 hours of instruction over four consecutive years in a Guild-accredited training program. For more information, visit www.feldenkrais.com

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