

Tap into your body's wisdom to release unhealthy patterns of movement.

Inside-Out Bodywork

By Linda Knittel

If you want someone to rub away knots in your back or aching shoulders, don't call an Ortho-Bionomy (O-B) or Feldenkrais practitioner. It's not that these techniques can't address such trouble spots; both are exceptional at easing tight muscles, healing injuries, and alleviating chronic pain. But unlike therapists who use more manipulative bodywork techniques (like massage), Ortho-Bionomy and Feldenkrais practitioners don't do the work for you. They show you how to do it yourself, teaching you to tap into the internal wisdom of your body. As with the practice of yoga, the awareness achieved through Ortho-Bionomy and Feldenkrais can improve health and flexibility, and can provide you with a deeper connection to yourself and a greater engagement with life.

If you ask an Ortho-Bionomy practitioner to describe what she does in six words, the answer might be, "Find a pattern and exaggerate it." Say your problem is a stiff neck. During your first visit, an O-B practitioner will ask you to describe the pain. Then she will assess your body while you stand and again as you lie, wearing comfortable clothes, on a massage table. Using gentle pressure and verbal dialogue, she will locate tension points in your neck area. Next, she will determine your neck's habitual pattern of muscular action by gently moving your head into a position that feels familiar and comfortable to you. Once she finds the pattern, she will exaggerate it by adding a little pressure, then wait to feel a release in the tension points. Generally, the nervous system takes between a few seconds and a few minutes to recognize that it has been restricting certain muscles and to send the muscles a message to let go.

When used on various trouble spots in the body, this practice of "spontaneous release by positioning," along with O-B's other techniques, can promote increased flexibility, range of motion, circulation, balance, and awareness. "Yes, the works helps people relieve tension, pain and discomfort," says Phyllecia Rommel, a practitioner who teaches the technique at the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Portland, Oregon. "But it also helps to enhance self-knowledge. Like yoga, it helps you deal with things that come up and then get past them."

There is a good deal more to Ortho-Bionomy than easing restriction and pain by exaggerating neuromuscular patterns. In fact, there are seven phases, ranging from gentle postures to energy work meant to transcend space and time. While all this may sound a bit esoteric, O-B basically embraces the idea that if a practitioner uses movement and directional pressure on your tissues to present your nervous system with what O-B call a "preferred position," your body will choose this more comfortable alignment over one that involves strain.

Although Ortho-Bionomy's creator, Arthur Lincoln Pauls, was a black-belt judo instructor rather than a yoga teacher, the modality's principles are much like those of

yoga, says Lindalouise Malcolm, a longtime yoga practitioner and somatic educator who uses O-B in her Portland classes. “Both are about transformation from within.”

Not only has Malcolm learned to do yoga ortho-bionomically-moving slowly so the body understands and integrates each step – but she has also seen first-hand its benefits in her own practice and life. “When you use O-B principles in yoga, you do your practice more gently and move into positions the way your body naturally wants to move,” she says. “You become much more inner-directed, and that new awareness brings about incredible shifts.”

Retraining the Body

Each and every time a Feldenkrais practitioner watches you walk across a room, sit in a chair, or turn your head, he sees your entire history on display. In his eyes, every physical and emotional experience you’ve had has been preserved in the way you use your body. For Feldenkrais workers – they’re also often called teachers, in keeping with the idea that the technique is a form of movement reeducation – the goal is to help you go beyond your know possibilities to discover more comfortable and efficient ways to move. “The work is about showing the nervous system that there are often easier ways to do things,” says Deborah Vukson, a Feldenkrais practitioner and yoga instructor in Eugene, Oregon. “I help a student’s body distinguish what is working and what is not.”

Of course, the human body doesn’t consciously create unhealthy movement patterns; they arise as we do our best to continue functioning in the face of physical or emotional trauma. In fact, according to the Russian born physicist Moshe Feldenkrais – an engineer and judo master who developed the modality – when the neuromuscular system is given the chance, it will always choose the most effective way to behave. And providing that chance is precisely what both individual and group Feldenkrais sessions are all about: using gentle, repetitive movement sequences to retrain the body to move as efficiently as possible. With efficiency comes ease and comfort.

At the start of your first individual session of Feldenkrais – formally know as “Functional Integration” – the teacher will listen to your concerns and observe how you hold and move your body. Most of the work is then performed while you lie loosely clothed on a massage table, although some sequences are done while you are standing or sitting.

By very gently moving the bones, the teacher then explores the various rotations of a joint in order to detect the smoothest movement pathway for a given action, says Kim Cottrell, a speech pathologist and Feldenkrais teacher in Portland. Once found, this most efficient movement pattern is repeated several times to give the body a chance to integrate it. Occasionally, one session is all it takes for you to feel and ongoing difference, but Cottrell says working with a student a number of times is generally necessary to ensure significant change.

For example, if it’s your shoulder that is giving you trouble, a Feldenkrais teacher might first show you with her hands the ways you habitually hold and move the joint. Then by gentle maneuvering your arm in various positions around and across your body, she would present your neuromuscular system with all the other ways your shoulder can move in order to remind it what is possible and what is most comfortable. “This technique can show the nervous system that it has been holding the shoulder in one place, when it really has many options for relating to the rest of the body,” says Vukson.

Presenting people with new possibilities for everyday movements is also the goal of Feldenkrais group classes, known as “Awareness Through Movement.” For about the price of a drop in yoga class, students are instructed to perform carefully planned movement experiences while sitting or lying on the floor. Although each lesson centers on a particular joint or area, noticeable benefits are often felt throughout the body as well as in the mind, thanks to the human body’s highly sophisticated system of neuromuscular linkages. “Not only does your body feel better, but your sense of who you are in the world may shift,” says Cottrell. In other words, although you may come into class simply expecting to improve your physical being, you find yourself leaving with a stronger, more confident sense of self.

The fact that movements of Feldenkrais can serve as a conduit to a deeper connection to yourself is one of the ways in which it’s similar to yoga. “When asked what you get from yoga, you could answer, ‘Better circulation, increased flexibility, and pain relief,’ but what yoga really does is change your life,” says Vukson. “The practice of yoga isn’t always pleasant, but it does make your life more authentic.” Feldenkrais does this too. “It is simply the use of movement to discover possibilities,” says Cottrell. “It’s learning how to be aware.”

The active healing techniques of both Ortho-Bionomy and Feldenkrais may seem a bit foreign if your idea of satisfying bodywork involves simply lying semiconscious while a skilled practitioner kneads your body into a looser, more relaxed state. However, if you are interested in playing a part in freeing your body of its restrictions or pains while deepening your sense of self-awareness in a way that can enhance your yoga practice, then you might want to give these two bodywork modalities a try.

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