



Tiny movements, big benefits

The Feldenkrais Method is a remarkable way to keep fit and bust stress

‘WITH RESPECT, Madam,’ the man on the telephone said, “we work six days a week, we don’t work on Sundays.” This, when I had very tentatively suggested viewing a house – I know, don’t laugh, it’s beautiful – on Sunday because his client was keen to sell, but didn’t want evening viewings, and I was keen to look, but was indisposed on Saturday. No problem, I’ll go next Saturday. But that phrase “with respect” like “all due respect” and “no offence” really means the opposite: “What I’m about to say is intended to put you right back in your box.” Every offence is imminent, and worse, intentional. Blood boiling, I made my appointment and hung up.

But snootiness, even if it’s of no consequence, is like a good shove; it can throw you off balance for the rest of the day, longer even. I spent the afternoon quietly repeating “water off a duck’s back, water off a duck’s back”, but that coil wrapped around the base of my spine kept tugging, a reverse spring. While appreciating my own dramatic description of my stress-triggered ailments (some say psychosomatic, but they don’t suffer like I do!) – I’ll admit to being easily wound up.

Perfect timing to try out the Feldenkrais Method, which was recommended by a colleague. “It’s very relaxing,” she said. “It involves making these tiny movements . . . I can’t explain, you’ll have to see for yourself. Talk to Abbe.” So I went along to Abbe Harris’s Tuesday-night class

in the Olive Tree Studio, a yoga space on Grantham Street in Dublin.

We lay down and Harris invited us to consider first our feet, then legs, back and shoulders. What was the left leg doing? How much of the leg is in contact with ground? What about the shoulders, is one shoulder bearing more weight than the other? We raised our arms in the air. Which arm was easier, the left of the right? The analysis was non-directional, a sort of exploration of our physical selves. Then we rolled over on to our sides and Harris talked us through a tiny movement: sliding the top hand out along the floor a few inches. The action was very small, very slow, and she asked what happened with our heads when we moved. We repeated the movement rolling forward from the hip to see how that felt. We were not told a single correct way to go through the movement; the technique invites students to explore options for themselves. It reminded me of the difference between rote learning and problem-solving. Every few repetitions, Harris invited us to take a rest that, unbelievably, I found I needed; the process was all so relaxing I just wanted to lie there and have a snooze. The only thing keeping me awake was

HANDS ON Abbe Harris demonstrates an individual ‘functional integration’ session.

PHOTOGRAPH: PAUL HARRIS

my tootsies being a little cold. Harris had advised me to dress warmly, but with the muggy weather I didn’t pay her much heed. Anyway, the idea is not to fall asleep but to be relaxed and alert.

As I may have mentioned before, I’ve been having some lower back pain and spasm. More common that a silver Golf, back pain appears to affect most of the population. Mine has come and gone for years and, apart from acupuncture splurges, the odd dose of anti-inflammatories, and the occasional rant, I try to ignore it.

So it was slightly alarming to notice during the class that even the tiny forward movement caused some pain. It’s amazing what the body will put up with, but the continual low-level hum can suck the energy out of you. Harris notes that in daily life, people will continuously push through the pain barrier and this causes the muscles to spasm. The Feldenkrais Method tries to address this through “simple movements and directed attention to heighten awareness of the whole body as a powerfully interconnected system, helping you to recognise and let go of habitual patterns of tension that cause strain or limitation.”

Harris has a background in dance and therapeutic Pilates, and has also worked with the Alexander Technique, but now specialises in, and is a certified practitioner of, the Feldenkrais Method and a member of the UK Feldenkrais Guild.

In addition to the group class that I attended, Feldenkrais can involve individual lessons in “functional integration”. These one-to-one sessions are designed to address your specific needs and, in contrast to the group format where students are guided by only verbal suggestions and instructions, the individual sessions involve hands-on work by the practitioner with the student aiming to work to release patterns of tension and assist ease of movement.

LIE BACK AND COUNT TO ZEN

Harris is hosting a workshop in Rathgar on Saturday August 22nd (Finding Your Feet). There is an August intensive special offer – two “Awareness Through Movement” (group) classes and one (individual) Functional Integration session over a two-week period for €85. Outside this offer, the drop-in classes are €20 and individual appointments are €70. The fee for each workshop is €35. A 12-week course is €198, and six weeks is €105. For details, phone 087-4180646 or e-mail abbe@feldenkraisdublin.ie or visit www.feldenkraisdublin.ie.

Information about yoga classes held at the Grantham Street venue can be found at www.olivetreedublin.com. Harris will supply yoga mats (which are widely available in sports shops and yoga centres for around €20), blankets and props but don’t forget to dress snugly and wear your woolly socks.