

Our Bodily Stress Response and the *Feldenkrais Method*

By **Andrew Wright**

Stress impacts the health of our body and mind—often in negative ways. The *Feldenkrais Method* offers a fun and effective way to improve the way that we deal with stress.

Most people would agree that stress is a common consequence of living and working in today's fast-paced world. There are many "causes" for stress—for some it is the war, or the threat of terrorism, economic uncertainty, work pressures, family and relationship dynamics, health issues, etc. Yet stress is not something purely caused by outside forces, rather it is an internal response either to outside events or simply our own emotions. This response involves increases in muscular tension, blood pressure, the release of certain hormones such as adrenaline, and the interruption of normal breathing; ways of moving, healing, relaxation, and digestive functions. Our own personal bodily stress response is to a large extent a habit; and when approached as such can be improved. We have built into our nervous system, ways of recognizing and moving towards comfort and ease, and away from stress. These anti-stress mechanisms can be accessed if we use the power of our awareness to break unconscious and habitual responses to stress.

Personal Stress Pattern *Awareness Through Movement*® Lesson

Sit in a chair—preferably one that's not too padded or soft. Notice the way that you are making contact with the chair—with your buttocks, your legs, and possibly with your back and shoulders, and how your feet are resting on the floor. Notice your breath—what is the quality of your breath, how easy is it? Where does the breath go?

Now think of a problem, something that's an issue for you, something that's bugging you. Focus on that situation. What feelings come up? What judgments do you have? What would you like to do about it? Now notice your body—are there any changes from a minute ago? Do you have more or less connection with the ground, the chair? How is your breathing? Is it different? Is it tight or restricted anywhere? Where exactly? Are there any muscles that feel tighter? Where? Often people will feel it in their neck or chest or belly. Are there any changes in your posture? See if you can take in these bodily stress responses as a whole—it is your individual stress response pattern. This response is natural—it is wired into each of our nervous systems. Problems arise when we have this response excessively or inappropriately, or when it becomes ingrained in our body. Rest in sitting for a few moments.

Now again think of the stressful situation, notice your bodily response to the stress. And now, could you exaggerate this physical response? Wherever you are tightening, do it more. However your posture is changing, do more. If there was less breathing going on, do less again. And stay with that for a minute. Then let it go, and sit and rest for a minute.

Now re-check your contact with the chair and the floor, and with your breathing. These cues can serve as an anchor, as a way back to inner comfort. Think again about the stressful situation. But only think of the stress for as long as you remain aware of your contact with the floor, the chair, and your easy breath. As soon as you lose these anchors, detach from the stress, regain your inner comfort, and then try again.

After some practice with this ATM you may find that you don't respond as strongly or as often to stress, and that you can go back to normal more easily after a stressful event. In the course of your day, if you notice tension or stress in your body, try this process as a way to help relieve that stress.

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