

The Process of *Functional Integration*[®]

by Ralph Strauch, Ph.D.

“How can something so gentle be so powerful?”

“You hardly did anything; how could that cause the changes that I feel?”

I'm often asked questions like these at the end of someone's initial *Feldenkrais Functional Integration* session. The work seems so gentle, so non-intrusive, that people often find its effectiveness surprising. As you come to understand the *Method*, however, the reasons for its effectiveness become more understandable.

In a typical *Functional Integration* session you lie fully clothed on a low table (similar to a massage table but lower and wider) while the practitioner touches and moves you in gentle, non-invasive ways. The intent of this touch is to explore your neuromuscular organization — your subconscious responses to touch and movement — and to have a tactile, nonverbal conversation with your central nervous system about how you organize your body and your movement.

The process is akin to biofeedback, though more subtle and complex. In conventional biofeedback you are “hooked up” to a sensor measuring some aspect of your physiology that you are normally unaware of, such as the tension in a group of muscle fibers or the temperature of your fingertip. The biofeedback machine transforms this measurement into something you can see or hear — lighting a light or sounding a tone when the muscle fibers relax, or when your skin temperature rises. Without knowing exactly how you do it, you can learn to keep the light lit, or the tone on, thus consciously controlling what are normally unconscious processes. In this way you can learn to relax habitually tight muscles, or to increase peripheral blood circulation by warming your fingertip.

In *Functional Integration* the practitioner is the biofeedback instrument — sensing and providing feedback (through touch) about internal processes more complex than those addressed by conventional biofeedback. Instead of isolated data like tension in a small group of muscle fibers or the temperature of a fingertip, you receive feedback about larger and more complex patterns of neuromuscular organization and response. Through touch the practitioner also suggests alternatives — new organizations more comfortable, or more functional, than the old.

We often think about our limitations as structural deficiencies — muscles too tight or too weak, nerve damage, joint misalignment, the wear and tear of growing older. Structural deficiencies require mechanical correction, if they can be corrected at all. So we turn to exercise to strengthen “weak” muscles, deep tissue massage to relax “tight” muscles, drugs, forceful manipulations, or even surgery. These are forceful interventions, and we come to think of force as a necessary component of healing and change.

Functional Integration is based on an altogether different perspective — focusing on behavior and neuromuscular organization rather than structure. Limitations arise from the ways we use ourselves, from sometimes chronic disorganizations we subconsciously build into our actions and even our basic ways of

being-in-the-world. The sources of this disorganization are many — injury, illness, emotional stress, even environmental factors like flat floors — but the result is the same. We organize our actions in ways that are inefficient, counterproductive, even pain producing. We persist in those inefficiencies because the habits that maintain them grow so strong we aren't even aware that other possibilities exist, let alone of how to find them.

Functional Integration helps you find those other possibilities. It is a way of learning to organize yourself more efficiently, so that action, even just being-in-the-world, becomes easier, more fluid, more fun. The gentle non-invasive movements you feel in a *Functional Integration* session are not intended to “fix” anything or to create any structural change. They are a source of new experience, a chance for your nervous system to move beyond the narrow range of patterns to which you habitually confine yourself. This facilitates learning and change, at a deep nonverbal level.

The changes you experience result from this learning. You organize your bodymind system in an easier, more efficient way. You might learn to reduce the tension in your chest and breathe more easily, for example, to reduce the chronic tension that produces pain and stiffness in your lower back, or to turn your head without triggering pain in your neck. You move more fluidly, with less tension and stress than you habitually carry. You feel lighter, as you learn to feel the path of support through your skeleton more clearly and allow your skeleton to provide effortless, balanced support. Pain may diminish, as you release the restrictive patterns that create the pain.

Functional Integration is not a process in which the practitioner *does things to* you, or imposes change on you. The commodity which passes between practitioner and client is information; the one who actually makes the changes is you. Gentleness is an important facet of the work, because it facilitates that transfer of information. *Functional Integration* sessions last 45 minutes to one hour.

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