

THE ANXIETIES OF BEING A FELDNKRAIS PRACTITIONER

By Alan S. Questel

Anxiety and the Feldenkrais Method... As a Feldenkrais Trainer, writing this article is definitely within my area of expertise; yet questions flooded my psyche: Where do I begin? Do I know enough to write something intelligent? How do I make it useful for the readers? How much can I say that is meaningful in only a few pages?

I felt anxiety just thinking about writing an article on anxiety!

The difference between anxiety and fear

What is anxiety? How is anxiety different from fear? The lines between these states can often become blurred.

The website *VeryWellMind* describes quite well a set of distinctions between anxiety and fear in their article, “The Difference Between Fear and Anxiety”: “Anxiety is a diffuse, unpleasant, vague sense of apprehension.¹ It's often a response to an imprecise or unknown threat such as the uneasiness you might feel walking down a dark street alone. Your uneasiness in this situation would be caused by anxiety related to the *possibility* of something bad happening, such as being harmed by a stranger, rather than an immediate threat. This anxiety stems from your mind's interpretation of the possible dangers.

... Fear is an emotional response to a known or definite threat. If...someone points a gun at you and says, “This is a robbery,” then you'd likely experience a fear response. The danger is real, definite, and immediate.²

Although the focus of the response is different (real vs. imagined danger), fear and anxiety are interrelated. When faced with fear, most people will experience the physical reactions that are described under anxiety. Fear can cause anxiety, and anxiety can cause fear. But the subtle distinctions between the two [will] give you a better understanding of your symptoms and may be important for treatment strategies.”³

Not knowing

The majority of our traditional educations have been about ‘knowing’, we gather information to help us feel confident and believe we really are the experts we are supposed to be. In our cultures and professions, the idea of ‘not knowing’ is something to be avoided; it can be seen as an indication of incompetence. *Not knowing is one of the major sources of our anxieties and fears*; at least we believe this to be true. Maybe it doesn’t need to be this way.

A great deal of our learning and experience in the Feldenkrais is about engaging in ‘not knowing’. Unfortunately, it is also the cause of much of our anxiety and fear.

Moshe writes in *The Case of Nora*,⁴ “In the work that I do, I have to remind myself of familiar phenomena and look at them afresh, as if I had never known them. In this way I find solace in difficult moments and insight into the case at hand.”

What Moshe wrote is deeply imprinted in my brain. Furthermore, my memory (inaccurately) is that he said it again and again throughout the book. The idea of coming to my lessons freshly, without anticipating what I would do, to really ‘find out’ eventually became the foundation on which my lessons are built. Yet, for many years doing this terrified me. I wanted to know. I wanted to have **certainty**.

Robert B. Dilts, author and trainer of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, wrote a monograph “Strategies of Genius,”⁵ analyzing Moshe’s ‘strategy’, which provides insight about what Moshe did and how he did it. He writes “One thing that is certainly remarkable about... [Moshe’s] feedback loop is that it is designed to locate what he does *not* know, something that would be embarrassing or threatening to many.”

Dilts’ article provided me with the assurance that ‘not knowing’ was a resource to use, rather than avoiding it. This point of view provided me with a container I used to hold the anxiety of not knowing.

Contextualizing these ideas, for ourselves and for our students, helps us understand that not knowing is not the same as imagining the worst. One thing is clear, reducing anxiety takes time. Getting comfortable with not knowing happens incrementally.

Know thyself

The questions I initially encountered when embarking on writing this article are part of the process many of us grapple with when we begin new challenges or endeavors. This is notably true if we desire to be good at the endeavor.

I began my Feldenkrais practice with similar thoughts and questions. Will I ever understand this work? Will I be good at it? Can I make a living doing this? Yet, simultaneously having these conflicting thoughts: ‘I will never understand this work.’ ‘I will be really good at this.’

Clearly these thoughts are representative of the anxieties I felt (feel).

In *Body and Mature Behavior: A Study of ANXIETY, Sex, Gravitation and Learning*⁶ [my emphasis on anxiety] it is clear Moshe thought anxiety was a fundamental, recurring theme worthy of further understanding and concrete exploration when he says:

“Muscular tension and anxiety are invariably so closely interwoven in all states of emotional disorder that it is difficult to see how any real advancement towards clearer understanding of the nature of cures is possible without greater knowledge of the phenomenon of anxiety. ...

In my experience the real reason underlying peoples’ complaints of their state of strain, anxiety, etc., is, in every case, ignorance. Not personal ignorance, which can be remedied by asking help from those who know better, but a much worse type. I mean the fundamental ignorance that creeps into science itself; abstractions that are generalized and temporarily exaggerated do incalculable harm.“

Moshe continues, going into great depth, explaining the relationship with anxiety and orientation, our vestibular system, our neurology, the anti-gravity muscles (fear of falling), breathing, heart rate and our conditioning.

In *The Potent Self*⁷ Moshe wrote, “At the root of all anxiety, where education has failed, lies inner compulsion to act or to check action. And compulsion is sensed when motivation for action is conflicting; that is, when the habitual pattern that the person can enact is sensed as compromising the person’s security. ... The anxiety experienced in the face of real danger would normally be experienced by most of us. But the anxiety which is due to inner compulsion has no apparent reason; it is essentially linked with the means of getting security that the person has formed during her personal history”.

As I read Moshe's writings, combined with the definitions of anxiety and fear, I remembered Moshe's one sentence description of the Feldenkrais Method: *Know thyself*. The idea of knowing oneself is key to understanding and engaging the topic of anxiety.

Self-image

When we learn about issues and challenges through our own personal explorations, we become better equipped to help others navigate them. We need to keep in mind that anxiety and fear exists on a very large continuum, and we are not therapists. What we can do is facilitate and guide ourselves and others towards more satisfying outcomes, hopefully reducing the challenges that the feelings of anxiety and fear bring up in us.

Moshe's concept of self-image is important; self-image is comprised of our thinking, our feeling, our sensing and our acting. These aspects of our self are occurring at the same time, although one part may appear more dominant at different times. A change in any one aspect can produce a change in the others. Our job as practitioners is to explore and refine self-image through the doorway of movement. Moshe's books give in-depth detail regarding the body state of anxiety. Yet, to gain a more comprehensive understanding we need to include the thoughts and the feelings that are part of the mix.

Fear or anxiety? Am I encountering something that is real or something I am imagining? Can I identify the thoughts associated with these feelings, as well as the feelings associated with these thoughts? Answering these questions can clarify and guide us to actions supporting what we really want; clearer thinking and the calm to move forward.

Perhaps more important, once I have distinguished if I am perceiving something real or something imagined, how do I go about finding my way past these thoughts and feelings? *What can I do* that leads me to new actions?

It is difficult to generalize exactly ‘what to do’, yet by looking at real, and imagined, issues associated with our anxieties and fears we have a better chance of knowing... what to do... so we can do what we want.

Sound familiar?

Listed below are a few internal conversations to consider. Ones that are common to trainees, new practitioners, more experienced practitioners and yes, assistant trainers and trainers:

- Am I a charlatan?
- Will I ever become good at this?
- Will I ever feel confident doing this work?
- Why do people keep coming back when I can’t understand what I am doing?

These thoughts are usually accompanied with the feelings of anxiety and fear; sometimes more anxiety and fear, sometimes less anxiety and fear. These thoughts often recur, even as we gain more experience and competence. Anxiety and fear are listed together here as some of what we encounter is real and some is imagined.

Many serious professions, where one has studied for a long period of time, and once completing their studies and practicums, are now expected to be the expert. If you consider this, it’s a pretty strange model. You study medicine, intern and then become a ‘doctor’, the same with studying law, you graduate law school, take the Bar Exam (at least in the USA) and now you are a ‘lawyer’. From one day to the next you go from being a student of something to an

expert of something. The same is true for us becoming Feldenkrais Practitioners. After going through this passage one can feel a quite a satisfying accomplishment, yet, this sudden passage is exactly what evokes the feelings and thoughts of being a charlatan.

The real answer to the question, ‘am I a charlatan?’ is ‘yes! I am a charlatan.’ How can I not be? I have studied and learned; then, all of a sudden, I am supposed to be the expert.

I often joke that the last place you want to be is in the coffee break room of new medical interns. I imagine their conversations are rife with anxiety, wondering how their patients survived their treatments and... thanking God, the patient didn't die.

Yet, is this idea of ‘I am a charlatan’ something real or something imagined? It is real in the sense of how we are feeling. Real in our *belief* that we don't know enough, yet... Real in that we do not feel ready to do this... yet. One imagines we have a wealth of learning behind us, and... we have sufficient knowledge at our fingertips, more than we are aware we have.

The important aspect is what do we do when facing these thoughts? We need to examine how to move past the anxiety and fear of this dilemma. I wrote an article in Feldenkrais Zeit, issue 19, “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” It is about one simple idea, *practice*. Practice as the means to become better, to feel better, to do better. I can now add using practice as the means to bring authenticity to your chosen profession... to no longer feeling like a charlatan. Practice becomes the means to reducing ones anxieties and fears. The article goes into more details exploring the ‘how’ of it all; I encourage you to read it.

Take a moment to consider the other anxiety/fear provoking questions I posed earlier. Will I ever become good at this? The answer is, yes, through practice. Will I ever feel confident doing this work? Yes, again the answer is through practicing it. Why do people keep coming back when I can't understand what I am doing? We can see that it's through practice that we come to

understand what we are doing and how we become better at articulating what we know. This has been the role of Assistant Trainers and Trainers over the years; to better articulate what we do as this helps people learn the Feldenkrais Method and assimilate it with ease into their role as practitioner.

In brief review: thoughts and feelings of anxiety and fear may continue to exist as one becomes more proficient in their work and as they attain new levels of recognition. This can happen all the way from new practitioner to trainer. I speak from personal experience.

My journey of anxiety

I became a practitioner and honestly, I didn't understand much of what I was doing. Certainly, at times, I felt like a charlatan; I clearly remember wondering, 'why do people keep coming back?' I don't know what I dreaded more, them not coming back, leaving me without income; or them coming back, with me not knowing what to do and not understanding what I was doing.

Over time, as I practiced, I felt more confused, more inept. I began to spiral downward; feeling less and less competent, becoming more unsure of myself with each Feldenkrais lesson/class. Eventually I landed in a place where I finally admitted to myself I was no longer able to do this work. I was a complete failure at being a Feldenkrais Practitioner; it was now time to quit.

Then something remarkable happened. While working I discovered something; a different way of approaching my lessons that generated new understandings, new relationships, and of utmost importance, a way that engaged my interest and enthusiasm again. I was saved! I can still do this! Whew!

Over time, my new understandings lost their shine, and again, I began the same downward spiral. Accompanied with all the exact same thoughts and feelings, fears and anxieties; I eventually landed, once again, at the realization that I was no longer able to practice. My feelings of failure were too strong to allow me to continue. It was time to throw in the towel, let it all go, time to quit.

Lo and behold, at this absolute low point, I encountered something new that once again raised me to a place where I became absorbed in what I was doing... Whew!

This spiraling downward process happened a few more times. Each time I decided to quit and each time, somehow I was saved. By the fourth or fifth time I had a glimmer of awareness. I recognized this moment. I thought; 'I know this.' I feel worse and worse; then, once again, I discover something new and... all is good again" All I needed to do was ride it out.

Then I began to feel worse, and I thought, that's okay, it will change. It got worse, but 'no worries' I reasoned, it always changes. Then it became worse than it ever had; spiraling down to a place where I had to admit I was wrong. It will NEVER get any better, I thought. This time I really reached rock bottom; I had to give it all up.

At this absolute, final, irreversible low point... I found something new! I was saved from my misery and the possibility of continuing the pursuit of my dream became reality. This experience taught me a valuable lesson: although I had a recognition of my learning process I still had to experience it. Unpleasant as it was, through each downward spiral, I was practicing engaging firsthand with my anxieties and fears; and through the engagement process I found my way through them.

Earlier in this article I noted that the initial questions I encountered when I began writing this article are similar to what many of us grapple with when we begin new endeavors; *this is especially true when we are invested at being the best in the endeavor.*

Our investment directly correlates to our feelings of anxiety and fear; as our feelings are enhanced when they are connected to something we value, something we desire, a direction we want to move towards. Again, we need to distinguish: am I encountering fear? something that is based in reality; or is this anxiety? something with no real foundation, a product of my confused and compulsive thoughts. It's important to note that I am not saying whether it's one or the other, anxiety or fear, as the shift between the two happens so quickly it's better to let them coexist.

You might think after this experience and realization that I was better equipped when I encountered these intrusive thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, no, I wasn't, at least not yet.

I became a very successful practitioner with a waiting list for FIs and 80 people a week in classes. Then I became an Assistant Trainer. The first FI I gave at the training was with 20 people watching me; ... and my only thoughts were: 'What if they ask me what I am doing?' 'I have no idea why I did that or why I am doing this.' or 'How can I explain what I don't know?'

I hope you are laughing when you read this. I laugh at it now, but at the time I was filled with huge anxieties and fears. I was taking on a greater level of responsibility; right alongside the increased responsibility my anxieties and fears grew exponentially. It felt bizarre to know I had come this far in my practice; yet, I once again encountered these feelings that made me feel like a complete failure. Of course, through practice, I moved past all that. Whew!

Then I became a Trainer. What was I thinking!? Why didn't I stay where I was? Why didn't I stay in a place where I was accomplished in what I could do? Once again, I went through the same processes, albeit a little more familiar. I can honestly say that it took me about three years

to arrive in a place where I felt I was finally doing the job of Trainer. A place where I felt good about myself again, finally alleviating most of my anxieties and fears.

Stay the course

Anxiety and fear are part of our lives. To say they are avoidable or to say they are inevitable emotions we need to get over is an inaccurate point of view. If we can understand their place in our learning, their place in our development, we can learn to embrace these difficult feelings. While ambiguity isn't necessarily comfortable, it is part of the path of *knowing thyself* and helps in finding a certain level of comfort in *not knowing*.

Practice... yeah, that again. Consider this possibility — when we practice engaging with our anxieties and fears, this paves the way to move beyond them, the way to move through them. Anxieties or fears are not banished by taking a pill or taking a workshop that guarantees freedom from these feelings. What does work is learning to distinguish what is real, what is imagined. This is how I successfully transition through my own fears and anxieties.

Notes

¹ Sadock BJ, Sadock, VA, Ruiz P. *Kaplan and Sadock's Synopsis of Psychiatry: Behavioral Sciences/Clinical Psychiatry*. 11th edition. Wolters Kluwer; 2015.

² *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th edition. American Psychiatric Association; 2013.

³ The Difference Between Fear and Anxiety, <https://www.verywellmind.com/fear-and-anxiety-differences-and-similarities-2584399>

⁴ Moshe Feldenkrais, *The Case of Nora: Body Awareness as Healing Therapy* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1977)

⁵ Robert Dilts, *Moshe Feldenkrais: NLP of the Body*, (NLP University Press, Scotts Valley, CA, 1990).

⁶ Moshe Feldenkrais, *Body and Mature Behavior: A Study of Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation and Learning* (International Universities Press Inc., 1949)

⁷ Moshe Feldenkrais, *The Potent Self: A Guide to Spontaneity* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1985)