



Alternative (to) Exercise: A Patient's Perspective

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How do you balance the risk of postexertional relapse with the risk of deconditioning? Here's how one woman with CFS is meeting the challenge with practices originating outside the traditional concept of exercise.

Sticking to an exercise program while in the grips of CFS is like walking the proverbial razor's edge. Experts agree on two things: (1) don't do too much and (2) don't do too little. Though it's ideal to work with a skilled physical therapist, sometimes low energy or strained finances can make this difficult, if not impossible. And ultimately, what constitutes "just right" is left up to the sick person. Finding the balance is a moment-to-moment process.

As someone who has experienced first the hell of exercise-exacerbated CFS, and later the double whammy of CFS and severe deconditioning, I've sought out alternative ways to mobilize body systems even when I feel too exhausted to move. I've found that practicing Feldenkrais and Qigong via audiotaped lessons empowers me to help myself—with minimal risk—when I'm too sick to work with a physical therapist. Neither of these modalities has provided me with the broad-spectrum benefits of, say, a brisk walk, but each has been therapeutic in

subtle yet often profound ways. Of course, each of us is different, and any new therapy should be undertaken with care at all stages and with professional guidance when necessary. This is merely an offering of what has worked for me and may work for you.

The Feldenkrais method

This form of mild exercise was developed in the 1940s by Moshe Feldenkrais, a Polish-born Israeli physicist, engineer and judo master. After suffering a series of knee injuries he applied his knowledge of the physical sciences and martial arts, plus the principles of human development, to the laboratory of his own body—ultimately retraining himself to walk. The culmination of this exploration was a system of gentle exercises that teaches the body to build neuromuscular pathways, in effect expanding its "movement vocabulary" for greater ease. The lessons last between 25 and 50 minutes, progress slowly, and the practitioner is repeatedly reminded to stay within

AT-A-GLANCE ►

- It's important for people with CFS to practice some form of exercise to prevent serious health risks from deconditioning.
- The Feldenkrais Method employs gentle but focused movement to help facilitate reconditioning of the body.
- Qigong utilizes concentrated breathing techniques to stimulate the body's internal systems.

her comfort zone. “Do less and go gently” is a credo of one of my favorite teachers, Ruthy Alon.

An example of a basic Feldenkrais lesson is the “pelvic clock.” The practitioner lies on her back and is instructed to feel into her body, sensing the contact of different muscle groups with the floor/bed and whether or not there is any tension.

She is then led through a sequence of pelvic tilts: forward then back; then to one side and the other, with rest periods after each direction so that the nervous system can integrate the information.

Finally she is instructed to visualize a clock on the floor/bed and to guide her pelvis first to one o’clock, then two and so on until she is making circles around the clock in both directions.

Throughout the lesson she is instructed to pay attention to her breathing and other parts of her body, such as the neck and shoulders. She is also encouraged to experiment with making slight variations in the trajectory of movement. At the end of the lesson there’s time to feel into the body again to evaluate whether there have been any changes from when she first checked in.

I find that practicing daily Feldenkrais calms my mental and physical state, reduces my pain levels and increases the ease of everyday activities such as tooth brushing and

walking. I do it in the evening as part of a sleep hygiene program and often in the middle of the night if I wake up and my mind is too busy to fall back to sleep.

Qigong bone breathing

Bone breathing is an ancient Chinese healing technique. It’s part of the vast series of exercises known as qigong (Chi Gong), loosely translated as “energy skills.” The practice of qigong has gained recognition from the Western medical community in the past two decades, thanks to a growing body of research dedicated to documenting its therapeutic effects.

Bone breathing uses breath and intention to bring the “qi,” or life force, into the bone marrow. No one knows exactly how bone breathing was developed, but qigong master and scholar Ken Cohen postulates that it originated with ancient hunters. Learning to feel and regulate the energy dynamics of their weight-bearing bones while waiting for prey would have increased their stamina and efficacy. They may have then taught the skill to the community for its broader applications in healing skeletal diseases and injuries.

Ancient Chinese practitioners associated the bones with the water element, because they could sense their fluidity and elasticity. We now know that the bones are 20 percent water, that white and red blood cells are manufactured inside the marrow

“Movement is life. Life without movement is unthinkable.”

- Moshe Feldenkrais



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and that the outer structure is in constant flux—expanding and contracting, absorbing and resorbing (letting go of) cells. Beginning bone breathing (which can be done lying down) works primarily on the marrow and tones the immune system. Advanced bone breathing (which is done sitting or standing) has been practiced to strengthen the bones' crystalline sheath and prevent or even reverse osteoporosis, a common side effect of deconditioning.

I've started on beginning bone breathing with the aspiration to move to advanced breathing when I am stronger. The lying-down practice takes a minimum of 20 minutes, during which time one uses intention to "expand" the bones on the in-breath and "squeeze out" stale bone marrow qi on the out-breath, gradually moving from the toes to the skull. I feel about a 20 percent increase in my overall vitality and the same amount of decrease in pain for about 5 to 30 minutes after this exercise, so I try to do it in the morning to get myself going. Other people find it profoundly relaxing and use it before sleep.

Vibration has also been demonstrated to increase bone density. Something as simple and pleasurable as placing a purring cat on your lap can decrease your risk for osteoporosis. Apparently the frequency of vibration of a cat's purr matches a frequency shown to stimulate bone health.

With both Feldenkrais and bone breathing, success depends on the quality of focused attention given to the exercises. Therefore an additional benefit for people with CFS is increased concentration. Feldenkrais lessons guide the muscles to move, albeit on a small scale. These micro-



movements may also serve to mobilize the body's lymphatic drainage in the way that a gentle belly laugh does.

Practicing these two techniques has helped me to manage some of the symptoms of CFS and to recondition my body in gradual ways that don't lead me to relapse. In sharing them with you, I hope you'll reap similar rewards. ■■

GETTING STARTED

For the physiology of bone breathing and written instructions, check out www.healsa.co.za/bonebreathing.htm (Note: the instructions specify a sitting position, but you can adapt this to lying down.)

For scientific briefs on the benefits of qigong, go to www.healingtaousa.com/cgi-bin/articles.pl?rm_mode2&artleid=40

For articles on the benefits of Feldenkrais, visit www.feldenkraisguild.com

Contact your local library for audio lessons or purchase them from the following companies:

White Cloud Institute (for Bone Breathing): PO Box 5151, Santa Fe, NM, 87502. 505-471-9330. www.whitecloudinstitute.com

The Chi Nei Tsang Institute: 282 Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94705. 310-848-9448. www.chineitsang.com

Feldenkrais Resources: 820 Bancroft Way, Suite 112, Berkeley, CA 94710. 800-765-1907 www.feldenkraisresources.com

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