

# What's Between You and Your Client: A Peer-to-peer Mentoring Model

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There is so much dynamic content that transpires between our clients and ourselves. Feldenkrais was, of course, very aware of this. The dyadic structure of FI® sessions—the 1-to-1 relationship—is a large part of its potency. We experience this every day in our work, we see it enacted in the videos we have of Feldenkrais’ lessons, and we read about it in **The Case of Nora**. We know from current science that we are built to be in relationship, and that our overall health depends on it.\* For many Feldenkrais® practitioners, it is in the dyadic relationship where we feel most effective.

We may also experience this potent relationship as *complex*, to say the least. Feldenkrais practitioners are trained to be sensitive to subtle increments of change in our clients' movements by listening carefully to ourselves. We are, in a sense, conduits for our clients' experience of themselves, which carries the potential for confusion. For example, in some clients who have experienced trauma, our freely touching them can provoke resistance or anxiety. They may become controlling, directing how and where we touch and move them—in essence, interrupting the flow of the lesson. We may feel friction with this in our thoughts and in our physical sensations. The feelings may confuse us in the way of, “Is this my friction or their friction?” kind of way. Even if the piece of our work that takes place on the table feels simple and clear, there are many ancillary interactions, from initial interview to receiving payment, that contribute to the dynamic content between us in the client-practitioner relationship. Our socio-cultural context, including gender identification and race, also animate our relationships. It is a challenge to sort out the complexities—because we are *IN* it!

When things come up in the FI® setting that puzzle or challenge us, we might seek support, or we might try to ride it out on our own. I have found peer-to-peer mentoring, using the Balint group\*\* process, to be enormously helpful in clearing confusion and offering a wider perspective on the dynamics between my clients and me.

In fall 2018 I was invited by a friend who is a Balint group leader to join a group she leads composed primarily of psychotherapists. I had been looking for consultation and support to remedy the isolation I felt in my private practice, and wanted to look more closely at the interpersonal dynamics there. The group provided me instant nourishment both in the form of new perspectives and in the feeling of community. I drank it up. My friend, Kris Wheeler, and I then cooked up a group process based on Balint specifically for body-oriented practitioners. We have led two of these groups, and plan to offer more in 2021.

In a Balint group, a facilitator begins the session by calling, “Who has a case?” A participant offers to share about a client-practitioner relationship—perhaps one that is troubling them, or even just the last person they saw. The “presenter” describes the situation—let’s say there’s a client I seem to have a good rapport with, but who always leaves me with a mini-drama around payment or scheduling. I would describe the client, what we are doing together, and the problematic situation. As the “presenter” I speak freely about the case, then the group is invited to ask “clarifying questions.” Sometimes it’s helpful to know details that have been left out, like, How old is the client? How long have you been working together? Anything that can help the group participants imagine themselves as the client and as the practitioner.

At some point the facilitator will say, “I think we have a lot to go on here,” and invites the “presenter” to sit back and listen. Then the magic begins. Participants in the group imagine aloud, speculate, even fantasize about what it feels like to be the practitioner and the client in that situation. There is no need to be “right,” instead the group shares in an open-ended creative process of conjuring and envisioning. Meanwhile, the presenter gets to quietly pass what they hear through their own filter of what feels useful and what doesn’t. For the presenter, what was once a sticky, confusing mess becomes clearer and less daunting. (Just like in FI sessions, the process of asking open-ended questions through touch and movement leads us to greater clarity and ease of movement.) In the last minutes of the session, the presenter is invited to comment if they wish.

What a luxury to hear from so many bright minds and then to be free to work through the problem with my client with new information and insight. In the Balint process we start from the principle that every participating practitioner is trained and competent in their work. This is no small thing, equivalent to our method’s placing value in the dignity of every client we see, no matter how compromised their functioning. How many times have you sought support only to be handed a load of “advice,” that leaves you feeling small and overwhelmed? Or maybe you have been on the other end, compulsively correcting someone when what was asked for was a listening ear? When we start with the presumption of competence, we dispense with these potentially hurtful dynamics.

I find intense pleasure in the role of a participant in the Balint group, which is one’s role in most meetings. Going into the imaginary space that allows me to put myself in the shoes of the presenter or client feels delightfully playful. I find I learn as much about my own client-practitioner relationships in listening to others’ scenarios and the insights provided by other participants as if I were presenting myself.

Balint groups are facilitated but non-hierarchical. In the world of imagination and speculation, all comers are experts and have something to offer, no matter their level of education or years in the field. Experienced facilitation is golden, but anyone with good understanding of the process can facilitate. The structure itself creates the conditions in which everyone can participate safely, freely and equitably; the facilitator’s job is to hold the structure.

Peer-to-peer mentoring groups, whether in the form of Balint-style consultation or in other styles, create non-hierarchical environments that cultivate a free exchange of ideas, risk-taking and creative thinking that are not as possible in other kinds of mentoring environments. What is key to making these forms nourishing and productive is an agreed upon structure, or set of principles, that guide how we talk to one another. In the professional discourse model used by

the Feldenkrais® Legacy group, for example, one practices listening-to-understand rather than listening-to-respond. This model is broadly applicable to many kinds of discourse, and improves communication by addressing how we function in dialogue with one another. The Balint group takes most of the treacherous guesswork out of talking about our work by assigning clear roles and holding to that fundamental principle of presuming competence. Balint groups are uniquely designed for case consultation, which is a specific kind of sharing, but the skills I have learned as a participant and facilitator are rippling through many areas of my work and life.

Models of sharing that promote equitable and safe communication are widely needed in an inequitable society. The Feldenkrais® community is not immune to reproducing social hierarchies like misogyny and white supremacy within our micro-culture. Every step we can take as Feldenkrais professionals to learn new, ethical ways of talking to one another is a step toward embodying the ideals of our method. Peer-to-peer mentoring has an important role in helping us to maintain and grow the ethical health of our profession.

To any fellow practitioner, including those who bristle at structured forms of communication, I encourage you to find ways of reflecting on and getting support in your practice that suit your style and your needs. Reach out to a colleague you have been wanting to get to know better, or create a consultation group with a few peers, in Feldenkrais or related fields, and begin to build trust so you can talk about relationship dynamics in a productive way. If it suits you, participate in a Balint group or something like it where you don't have to reinvent the wheel. We tend to ignore or avoid addressing difficult client-practitioner interactions. We also may tell ourselves that the only important relationship we have with our client is the one that happens on the FI table. When we do this we deny ourselves — and our clients—an important area of growth and health.

I have had long-standing, trusting, one-on-one relationships with Feldenkrais mentors who have guided me generously. I also meet with a small group of colleagues to share and study informally. I mentor new practitioners and trainees in ATM® teaching and FI individually and in small groups in what might be called a more traditional way. I am the member of a fabulous local consortium who markets collectively on the internet. I enjoy informal peer gatherings; they are fun and helpful in cultivating familiarity and warmth in our community. I would not give up any of these relationships for the world. AND, peer-to-peer mentoring through Balint groups holds a special place in my constellation of support. It is there where I take risks, and therefore make the greatest strides, in my growth as a practitioner.

\*References for, "We are built to be in Relationship"

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\*\* American Balint Society, <https://www.americanbalintsociety.org>

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You can find out more about Sheri's upcoming Balint offerings with Kris Wheeler by [clicking here](#). Learn more about her online classes [on her website](#).