

What Can Tai Chi Do For You?

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In a nutshell, tai chi can keep you healthy and happy. It's remarkably effective for relaxation, health and fitness. Besides that, it's fun.

Scientific studies have shown that tai chi works magic on health, improving conditions such as arthritis, heart disease, diabetes, respiratory diseases, and other chronic diseases. In addition, it improves balance, prevents falls, helps posture, and builds up immunity to disease. And if that's not all, tai chi improves mental illness, depression, and stress.

Here's to Your Health

Medical and fitness authorities stress that to be effective for health, exercise should contain three components: cardio-vascular fitness or stamina, muscular strength, and flexibility.

Cardio-Vascular Fitness

Cardio-vascular fitness means better heart-lung capacity. A good supply of blood and oxygen is essential for maintaining your health and for healing any disease.

In 1996, a study* was done involving 126 post-heart attack patients. They were randomly assigned to participate in either a tai chi class, an aerobic exercise class, or a non-exercise support group. The result: The patients from the tai chi group came out with better cardiovascular fitness and lower blood pressure than patients from the other two groups. To top it off, 80 percent of the people in the tai chi group kept up the practice of tai chi while the support group retained only 10 percent of its original membership.

Strengthening

By strengthening our muscles, we keep our joints stable and protected. Of course, we need our muscles to move and when we move, the muscles pump fluid and blood throughout the body, improving the functions not only of the organs and joints but also of the entire body.

Many well-known sports heroes suffer from osteoarthritis resulting from injuries. Yet, they are able to perform at their peak level because their strong muscles protect their joints. After they retire from active sports, however, and their training lapses, their muscles weaken. Arthritis sets in or flares up. Perhaps we can conclude that had they taken up tai chi upon retirement, they would have stayed in shape and enjoyed a healthier, happier retirement.

Flexibility

Flexibility improves our range of motion, making us more functional. Being flexible keeps our joints, muscles-our entire body-healthy and allows us to be more active. Take Jim, for example, a 56-year-old retired fireman. Because of an on-the-job injury, Jim couldn't lift his arms any higher than his shoulders. Otherwise healthy, he experienced ongoing frustration. He couldn't reach up in cupboards; he couldn't paint his house; he couldn't even reach a book on a shelf above his head.

Jim had given up hope of ever returning to normal. Then, simply to get exercise, he took up Tai Chi. Within six months, normal flexibility had returned to his shoulder joints. His life changed. He could reach!

Let's Get It Straight

In addition to these three main components of healthy exercise; tai chi also improves posture, an important component of health. Developing correct posture will result in less wear and tear of the joint muscles. When your posture is upright, the lung space is larger. Try taking a deep breath and straightening your chest. You'll notice that there's more space in the chest. Now try to hunch and see how the space in your chest diminishes. As you can see, the body works better in an upright posture.

Shirley suffered from lower back pain and sciatica problems for some time before she started doing Tai chi. Tai chi really helped her. "I think part of the reason I got better was that tai chi strengthened my back

muscles and made me conscious of keeping good posture throughout the day," she said. "I don't slouch any more. It has really made a difference."

Forget the Wobbles

As you might expect, good posture promotes better balance, thus preventing falls and the resulting injuries.

Shirley goes on to say, "Tai chi has also strengthened my ankles. I was twisting and spraining them once or twice a year. Now, between my stronger ankles and better posture, I enjoy having better balance, and as I get older, I'll be less likely to fall."

It's All in Your Head

The mind is the most important aspect of health. It's a universally accepted fact that the mind controls the body. Surely you've heard of people overcoming disabilities because of their positive attitudes and strong minds. And tai chi, as one of the most powerful mind-body exercises, teaches the student to be aware of the intrinsic energy from which he or she can perceive greater self-control and empowerment.

Almost everyone who practices tai chi recognizes its powerful effect on relaxation and concentration.

Take Joanne, for example. About 10 years ago, she was clipped by a van running a red light. She suffered seven pinched nerves between her skull and her coccyx. Having to frequently travel for business didn't help. For years she lived in pain.

Finally, a chiropractor suggested she try Tai Chi. "A six-week introductory course was enough to get me hooked," said Joanne. "I found that even in that short time, what we were doing was enough to help me start to relax, and that meant my back was finally getting a chance to heal."

Stress

You don't have to have sustained an injury to benefit from Tai chi-produced relaxation. Tai Chi simply offers a tool to help you cope with busy, modern-day life by appreciating the tranquility and the nature around you.

Going hand in hand with relaxation is the alleviation of stress. As a high-energy businessperson, Joanne has truly benefited from her eight years of Tai Chi. "Physically, I can handle stress a lot better than I used to. I'm now aware much earlier when I'm responding to stress and can react appropriately. That means I don't end up with tight shoulders and headaches.

"Mentally, I find that overall I handle people and stressful situations differently. I'm more inclined to sit back, listen, and evaluate a situation than I used to be," she continued. "I make much more use of energy (see sidebar) and try to be sensitive to other people's energy to assess their state of mind and body. That's tremendously helpful in dealing with difficult people and situations."

Spirit

In this context, the term "spirit" refers to simply feeling good rather than "spirit" in the sense of religious or occult. For instance, "Hey, today I'm in good spirits. Or "Today I'm happy." It's usually not easy to control your mood or your spirit with your conscious mind. If it were, depression wouldn't be so common, nor would it be so hard for doctors to treat. The spirit and mood is largely controlled by the subconscious mind, which has an immense power to control us. For instance, you know you're depressed, and although you dislike the condition, you can't seem to get out of your "funk."

Tai chi can help. The ancient Chinese were not totally clear in describing the unconscious mind, but they were aware of its immense power. Tai Chi was created incorporating this component. In fact, it's so powerful at uplifting one's spirit that many religious groups mistake tai chi as a "spiritual" practice in a religious sense and forbid their believers to practice it.

Enhancing the qi-vital life energy (qi)-during tai chi practice is an essential part of uplifting the spirit. It's an effective method of connecting with the unconscious mind to uplift your mental attitude. Once you get your body relaxed and calm, and your mind receptive, your qi will begin to circulate. And that will start your spirits soaring.