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The Physical and Mental Benefits of Seated Tai Chi Chih

A study in San Jose, California, finds where movement, meditation and spinal cord injury come together.

By Kazuko Shem, MD



If every picture tells a story, picture this: a group of people, gathered around an instructor, are slowly moving their hands inward and outward from their bodies. The instructor tells them to imagine that they are mimicking the graceful, effortless movement of seaweed. “I want each of you”, she says quietly, “to visualize being a long strand of kelp in Monterrey Bay. The current is gently circling around you and you are moving forward ... then backward ... then forward”.

What you’re seeing here, if your imagination is as good as theirs, is a Westernized version of Tai Chi called Tai Chi Chih® – Joy Through Movement. Unlike practitioners of the conventional form of Tai Chi who are generally lined up in rows, these individuals are in a circle. And unlike the vast majority of people who are standing up in those rows, they are seated because of spinal cord injuries and other mobility disorders.

An Unexplored Research Niche

I became a student of this meditative variation of an ancient Chinese form of self-defense myself several years ago when I was experiencing chronic neck pain, and I wanted to give Tai Chi Chih a try to get a relief from my neck pain.

One of the wellness benefits in my health plan was the opportunity to take a Tai Chi class, and when I was discussing my work as a rehabilitation physician with the instructor, she explained that some of the different forms and postures had been adapted to use only the upper body and could be carried out by people who were seated. I was especially intrigued when she mentioned that the exercises concentrated on wrist movements since people in wheelchairs often overuse their shoulders.

I quickly found a number of studies done on the physical and mental health benefits of Tai Chi Chih and Tai Chi in general, as well as some specific research on its value for people with neurological disabilities. There is also a considerable amount of research and literature on wheelchair exercise, although it focuses on strength and resistance training or aerobic conditioning. But there was virtually nothing related to the benefits of doing Tai Chi from a seated position, including a wheelchair. So it seemed that there was an unexplored niche here, an opportunity for some further study.

The instructor and I then decided to develop specifically a seated Tai Chi Chih class for individuals with disabilities who cannot do standing Tai Chi Chih.

I am currently conducting a spinal cord injury research study on which I am the Principle Investigator. I was fortunate to be awarded a Quality of Life Grant from the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, and we developed a research study that followed individuals with spinal cord injury over a 12-week period doing weekly Tai Chi Chih sessions. They also did the exercises at home with guidance from an instructional DVD that we produced.

Our objective for the initial study was fairly basic. We wanted to see if the stress reduction and improvements in quality of life and other benefits of conventional standing Tai Chi Chih could be transferred to the seated version. The short answer is a definite yes. The initial objective of the now ongoing study was to look at things like reduced pain and an increase in overall well-being and that's what the individuals taking part in Tai Chi Chih reported.

A Skeptic Convinced

One of the participants in the study was a very athletic man who had sustained a spinal cord injury in a skiing accident over 25 years ago. He has stayed in good shape, doing a lot of exercise as well as yoga, but he was a little skeptical at first about Tai Chi Chih. He said it seemed a little "holistic" and wasn't something he ever considered doing.

It only took one session for him to determine that he was getting something out of it, because he immediately noticed the calming effect it created. Over the course of several sessions he also recognized that it had value purely as a physical exercise. Other participants reported similar benefits including improvements in posture and functional strength that offered some direct transference to daily life. Some described feeling less fatigue during the day and noticing an improved sense of relaxation.

What I've also been seeing is that people seem to like the social nature of the class. Being in a group like this is different from solitary exercise. It's more like going to a gym and the participants have a chance to support and inspire each other during the sessions.

Based on what we're seeing at this point, we're committed to continuing the study into the future and hope to increase the number of people taking part. At some point we'd like to include men and women with

other ambulatory disabilities in addition to individuals with spinal cord injury. There is still work to be done, more research to carry out, but already there is some strong evidence indicating that a very basic, low tech and inexpensive form of exercise—really a combination of exercise and meditation—can have a positive impact.

As someone who has been involved in a quite a few research projects, I know that some considerable time can pass before the results of a study translate into something of value for the people involved. But in this case the benefits of seated Tai Chi were seen almost immediately. Even before the participants in the study reported on their experience, we observed a very basic but telling change in the group; people simply seemed more relaxed.

There were, as the instructor pointed out, more smiles each week. And that has been very gratifying for researchers and participants alike.

Dr. Shem is a Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation specialist at the Rehabilitation Center at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center in San Jose, California.

July 29th, 2010 | [2 comments](#) - (Comments are closed)

2 comments to The Physical and Mental Benefits of Seated Tai Chi

- Nancy Elkin

[July 29th, 2010 at 7:55 pm](#)

I am a retired physical therapist.
I teach tai chi in the community and often include people with disabilities.
This program looks great and I'd be interested in learning more about it.
thank you

- James Black

[July 30th, 2010 at 1:46 pm](#)

Wow!!! I did not know that Santa Clara Valley Rehab Center had all this going on in their Spinal Cord Unit. Seems like that place rocks...