

[IMAGE]

De-Stress with Tai Chi

By Bill Reddy, LAc, Dipl. Ac.

Tai chi, a 2,000-year-old Chinese fitness regimen with origins in the martial arts, features gentle movements similar to yoga and meditation. Research suggests it is effective in relieving stress, increasing flexibility and building strength. So, have you tried tai chi?

Beginning in the early 1970s, when the "bamboo curtain" was lifted, a few jewels of Chinese culture began to trickle into the West. One specific example of China's best-kept secrets is the use of acupuncture and tai chi to combat stress.

Stress can be simply defined as "what you feel when life's demands exceed your ability to meet those demands." A vast majority of people living in populated urban areas can identify with the feeling of being overwhelmed. Job, school, family and social engagements are all competing for their place on their collective schedules. Even though most people have little control over the stressors in their lives, they can actively change how they respond to them through the practice of tai chi or by getting acupuncture treatment.

The Chinese view physical manifestation of stress as a stagnation or blockage of internal energy, what they call qi (pronounced "chee"). Signs and symptoms of stress can include: tension headaches, sleep disturbances, hair loss, fatigue, hypertension, heart palpitations, cold hands and feet, and immune-system suppression, to name a few. Having a compromised immune system can present itself with symptoms such as frequent colds, flu, bronchitis or sinusitis, and in extreme cases, autoimmune disorders such as lupus and Crohn's disease.

Both acupuncture and tai chi are ways to release blockages and promote the free flow of this energy. Scientists are still trying to fully understand the mechanisms of acupuncture, the millennia-old method of inserting fine hair-like needles into the body to promote health and well-being. It has a strong scientific basis and has been featured in more than 11,000 journal articles available through the National Institutes of Health database, PubMed, studying acupuncture through double-blind, placebo-controlled clinical trials.

According to a Yale Medical School study involving 55 healthy volunteers, acupuncture was shown to significantly reduce stress, as measured by blood pressure, anxiety, heart rate and electrodermal activity. Medical doctors are interested in using this modality of treatment to relax patients before surgical procedures. Additionally, in a double-blind, placebo-controlled study published in 1998, researchers demonstrated that acupuncture was 85.7 percent effective at treating patients with generalized anxiety disorder with no negative side effects.

In contrast, a common anti-anxiety drug such as Klonopin has the following side effects: clumsiness, dizziness, drowsiness, slurred speech, abdominal/stomach cramps, lack of sexual desire, constipation, diarrhea, dry mouth, headache, muscle spasms, nausea or vomiting, trembling and fatigue, to name a few. The major difference between Western (allopathic) medicine and Eastern medicine is that Western medicine tends to treat the symptoms (migraines, arthritis pain, allergies), whereas traditional Chinese medicine treats the root cause, leading to the symptom(s) disappearing.

Some experts describe tai chi as "acupuncture without needles." Webster's collegiate dictionary defines tai chi as "an ancient Chinese discipline of meditative movements practiced as a system of exercise," but this definition completely ignores the practice's ability to balance a person's qi.

Tai chi literally translates into English as "supreme ultimate," which gives a sense of how the Chinese view this art form. Not only do the slow twisting and untwisting movements of tai chi massage a practitioner's internal organs, increasing blood circulation and optimizing spinal-nerve transmission, but also they reduce key "stress chemicals" in the body. Seniors who practice tai chi regularly have a significantly lower chance of falls compared to their peers due to improved balance. Tai chi also benefits their cardiovascular and respiratory health and immune function, according to a 2004 article published in the American Journal of Physical Medicine Rehabilitation.

Originally, tai chi chuan (where "chuan" means "fist" or "boxing") was developed to train the Chinese emperor's troops for battlefield warfare. There are a large number of styles of tai chi named after the family who developed them (Yang, Wu, Sun Chen), with the most common feature being slow, fluid, dance-like movements. A few styles incorporate explosive actions along with the slow movements. In a recent interview, Dr. Lixing Lao, director of the University of Maryland's complementary and integrative medicine program and tai chi instructor, said "Not only do I see profound improvement of my Tai Qi students' perception of stress, but also I keep my own stress levels at bay, despite my harried schedule of teaching,

researching, treating patients and publishing."

A combination of acupuncture and tai chi practice is synergistic and has the greatest effect on reducing stress and should be seriously considered in any holistic stress management program.

Reduce stress and improve balance and agility with these simple tai chi exercises, courtesy of the AARP:

Warding Off

- Pretend you're holding a beach ball, with your left hand on top of it and right hand underneath it. Take a small side step with your left foot (point your toes left). As you do this, sweep your left arm upward (palm out) and your right arm by your right hip, palm facing down.
- Return to the starting position by rotating your left foot so your toes point forward again. Bring your left foot back under you. Allow your arms to draw inward, and end with your right hand on top of the imaginary ball.
- Repeat on the other side. Take a small step with your right foot. Raise your right arm and lower your left.
- Reverse the movements to return to the original starting position (left hand on top of the beach ball). Complete this cycle at least twice in a fluid motion.

Working At Shuttle

- Stand with your knees bent slightly.
- Step forward with your left foot and raise both hands in front of your face (palms out). Your left hand should be farther from your body than the right one.
- Return to the starting position by reversing the move and bringing your left foot back while lowering your hands.
- Step forward with your right foot, again raising your hands. Your right hand should be in front of the left. Repeat the progression three or four times.

Golden Cock Stands On One Leg

- Position a sturdy chair on your left. Stand with your feet hip-width apart, your right arm slightly bent at the elbow, palm facing down. Use the chair for support, if necessary.
- Shift your weight to the left leg, and raise your right hand and knee in one motion. Hold this position

for one second. Lower your hand and knee to return to the starting position. Repeat steps 1 and 2.

- Move the chair to your right side, and repeat steps 1 and 2 (holding the chair with your right hand and lifting and lowering your left hand and leg). Repeat the progression three or four times on each side.
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