

T'ai Chi: An Alternative Way to Exercise



For many people with physical disabilities and/or pain a dilemma exists between the need to exercise and the pain and difficulty that can arise with exercising. For these people there are a limited number of options that can successfully meet their needs. One option that is becoming more prevalent and well known is T'ai Chi.

T'ai Chi is an ancient Chinese exercise form that was developed from a combination of martial arts exercises and meditation around the 13th century. It aims to integrate the mind, body and spirit to function better and 'in harmony' with the outside (real) world.

T'ai Chi was originally practiced privately, techniques passed on from father to son. The beginning of wide spread teaching began in the mid-1800's in China and it began to take root in the United States in the late sixties. There are now many forms of T'ai Chi being taught throughout the world.

There are a number of basic guidelines that are developed, maintained and practiced during a Tai Chi session. These guidelines include mindfulness, postural alignment, breath awareness, active relaxation, slow movement and integrated movement. Mindfulness is awareness of the present moment and of the position and feeling within your body. Postural alignment allows your body to move and function

in the most efficient manner possible. Breath awareness or using the natural diaphragmatic breathing patterns allows for maximal circulation throughout the body. Active relaxation or the ability to be both alert and calm at the same time promotes the flow of energy throughout the body. T'ai Chi movements are performed in as slow a pace as possible. This facilitates strength and endurance and allows the practitioner to focus on the other basic guidelines. Integrated movement refers to the concept of the body as one unit whose foundation is the head, trunk and pelvis. This unit moves as one and all extremity movements are initiated through the rotation of this unit.

A lot of research has been performed over the past 10-15 years showing the health benefits of T'ai Chi for both the ill and well populations. The research suggests that T'ai Chi can improve balance, decrease falls, increase strength, lower blood pressure, enhance respiratory and immune functions and promote emotional well being.

T'ai Chi is an appropriate form of exercise for all people. It can help improve ones physical, mental and emotional state in a relatively easy manner without increasing pain or symptoms. Physical Therapy at Jefferson Valley offers a T'ai Chi/Yoga type exercise class for patients twice a week. A physical therapy prescription is required from your doctor before you can begin the class.