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Evoking Relaxation

Tai Chi and Qigong can be applicable in the acute-care setting

By Shirley Wright Dobson, PT

Tai Chi and Qigong are ancient Chinese exercise forms with a present relevance to acute-care physical therapy. This is my experience as I spend my days in a hospital setting. "Qigong is an ancient Chinese healing system that improves the quality and circulation of the body's vital energy" ([stonerivertaichi.com](http://stonerivertaichi.com)).

Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese exercise well-known for its benefits to people of all ages. Numerous studies have documented its beneficial impact on posture, strength and relaxed movement for people of diverse medical and physical conditions. Physical and occupational therapists across the United States are including aspects of Tai Chi in their outpatient, home health and wellness programs. However, as an acute-care physical therapist, I have learned and continue to learn their value in my practice.

### **A Quiet Impact**

Aspects of Tai Chi have been filtering into my personal and professional life since I first attended a continuing-education course for ROM Dance in 1994. Long after that weekend, the quiet impact of what I had learned continued to impress and change me in small but significant ways. Teaching patients how to relax tense muscles to assist relieving their severe pain enticed me. The principles of mindfulness caught my attention: bringing awareness to the current moment rather than allowing the mind to drift to a thousand possible futures and pasts; coming home to the moment. Seeing a situation with a slightly different perspective—as if taking a single step to the sidesuggested powerful ramifications to me in my practice.

I began including in my assessments questions for patients not only about what body part was hurting, but also what was not. This slight adjustment elicited a small but powerful shift in focus. Their attention now focused on their strengths and wellness rather than only their illness and pain.

I began studying the *Tai Chi Fundamentals* form from Tricia Yu and Patricia Culotti this past year (this program teaches Tai Chi in a motor-development progression). I began learning Qigong in recent months. I am impressed again and again with the relevance of this training to my acute-care practice as a physical therapist.

As an experienced therapist, I feel compelled to offer this powerful gift of possibilities. The following is my experience of Tai Chi and Qigong and how it has influenced my practice in acute care.

### **Relaxation Learning**

Tai Chi and Qigong both cultivate a relaxed awareness. Being relaxed and attentive during activity is an essential aspect of care in a hospital setting.

Mindfulness and focus improve the therapist's attention to the patient's needs and intuition for identifying changes in a patient's demeanor and presentation of symptoms.

"Learning to relax and quiet your mind helps you to connect with other people and your surroundings, and to feel more responsive to what is occurring around you," stated Tricia Yu in her program Tai Chi Mind and Body. "Being relaxed and attentive has helped me in noticing changes in my patients' complexion, breathing patterns, and other subtle signs of distress."

Sometimes the acute-care physical therapy session is a mini-stress test with the therapist's intuitive skills the primary monitor of distress. Often, cardiac monitors only recorded artifact that pulse oximeters were unable to "pickup" during a therapy session. To recognize and manage appropriately any signs of distress, I relied on my instincts and skill. An increased sensitivity is incredibly useful.

Tai Chi improves the therapist's physical control and balance during a variety of movements, thereby improving the therapist's ability to use optimal body mechanics during often-difficult situations with acute patients. Put simply, Tai Chi practice helps therapists avoid work-related injuries.

Many of us want better posture, body mechanics and to facilitate the same in our patients. Tai Chi and Qigong offer a pathway that naturally cultivates these skills and postures. Among other positive impacts, I have noticed a change in my stance while charting, assisting with bed exercise, and performing those occasional maximal-assist transfers.

I have often thought that working in a hospital environment is as physically risky as construction work: patients faint, become suddenly frightened, or have an unexpected tonal response, and abruptly a simple task becomes extremely challenging.

As an older physical therapist, I am also very aware of the implications a simple mistake could entail; a back injury could change the focus of my career. Too many therapists have learned this very painful lesson. I have found that Qigong and Tai Chi train the individual in conscious and subconscious ways to be balanced and relaxed—a crucial skill in many situations in acute care.

Tai Chi practice can also improve the therapist's awareness of therapist-patient interaction for more effective neuro-facilitation. My sense is that Tai Chi and Qigong can improve the therapist's sense of tone imbalances, weight-shifts, postural misalignments and the subtle cues needed to facilitate a normal flow of motor control.

### **Balance in Movement**

Tai Chi teaches a listening quality for a martial art and meditative-exercise purpose. This same skill translates very well to an awareness of patients' needs, resulting in an appropriate offer of support and facilitation. Feeling the teacher's light correction during Tai Chi and Qigong has given me a heightened sense, an understanding of what the patient feels when having a new body movement facilitated that initially feels very strange.

Creating balanced and relaxed movements during Tai Chi and Qigong gives me personal experience of how it feels to a patient to move along a new path of physical habits, especially when recognizing that old body postures and habits are causing illness or pain.

Tai Chi and Qigong also teach relaxed breathing with movement, which is essential for the optimal treatment of patients who are in pain or have cardiac and respiratory challenges. These three diagnoses are encountered again and again in the hospital setting.

I use Tai Chi and Qigong principles with these diagnoses by teaching patients a slower, relaxed breathing pattern and an efficiency of movement. These exercises facilitate a restful awareness that relieves anxiety, which the therapist can in turn pass on to the patient. Anxiety management is an indispensable part of pain, cardiac and respiratory disease management.

Practicing Qigong and Tai Chi, I have learned and continue to learn new skills in relaxed, balanced movement; diminished anxiety follows naturally. I have learned that my ability to teach relaxed breathing is greatly facilitated by the depth of my experience and understanding. Tai Chi and Qigong offer a very effective medium for learning these skills.

Tai Chi teaches a natural, relaxed posture that allows for a safe, balanced movement. It teaches the slow flow of movement from foot to foot, which is useful for patients having difficulty with weight shifting due to neurological problems, balance problems and painful conditions.

The imagery used in Tai Chi and Qigong provides a wonderful landscape to illustrate desired movements. Telling patients to shift slowly as if with a gentle wave is a wonderful way to give them something soothing to consider while they attempt a painful or difficult exercise. The use of imagery seems to focus their attention differently, and they relax.

Simple exercise instructions may not offer an adequate pathway to accomplish the goal of a smooth and controlled movement. Tai Chi and Qigong practice offer a more multidimensional understanding of movement and therefore a means to reach these important goals.

In conclusion, physical therapy isn't just about what we do as therapists, it is also about who we are and how we are as therapists. Tai Chi and Qigong offer ways to deepen our skills.

While therapists will gather insight from whatever source of experience they encounter, no exercise regimes in my experience are as helpful in the acute-care setting as Tai Chi and Qigong. No other martial art in my experience is as gentle in its movements and as accessible to so many. Tai Chi and Qigong offer a wealth of benefits for both therapists and patients that are many-layered.

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