

Reasons for Engaging and Maintaining Tai Chi Practice

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Abstract

Objectives: This paper describes individuals' self-reported reasons for engaging in and maintaining Tai chi practice and perceptions of Tai Chi's distinction from other forms of exercise.

Design: Data was collected via survey questionnaire containing closed and open-ended items which were generated by a panel of experts in Tai Chi.

Settings/Location: A one-week Tai Chi workshop in Sydney Australia

Subjects: A convenience sample of participants who attended the workshop was recruited.

Results: The survey response rate was 72.3%. Thematic analysis of open-ended questions revealed participants' reasons for undertaking and maintaining their practice of Tai Chi as centring on the activity being capacity-appropriate, engaging, and enabling.

Conclusions: Tailoring and targeting interventions based on these factors may enhance adherence and improve health outcomes.

Introduction

The benefits of physical activity are indisputable, but engaging individuals to take part in sustained activity is challenging.¹ Although of particular consideration in older adults, adherence to physical activity is a challenge across the lifespan and is dependent on personality characteristics, physical condition, and environmental factors.² Tai Chi, an ancient Chinese art/exercise, is often well regarded as a martial art. It is characterised by slow controlled movements, deep relaxed breathing, and correct posture enacted within a state of awareness and concentration. According to Plummer³, tai chi is not just performing the movements of tai chi, and its essence can be attained when each movement is integrated with the mind, shifting of body weight, muscle relaxation, and breathing control. Experienced practitioners who regularly practice Tai Chi are said to be able to appreciate this essential quality and integrate it into their daily lives.⁴

Although clinical trials have reported excellent adherence to Tai Chi interventions⁵, few studies have investigated participant experiences and perceptions of Tai Chi, particularly in individuals who were not part of a research study. More information is needed to understand older people's reasons for not only adopting, but maintaining physical activity. Tai Chi practitioners' experiences may reveal insights to adherence to this type of exercise which may thus inform intrinsic and indispensable elements of an intervention.

During a recent international Tai Chi workshop, seventy-six respondents completed the questionnaire indicating a response rate of 72.3%. Overall, participants described Tai Chi as capacity-appropriate, engaging, and enabling. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses is in Table 1.

Tai Chi is perceived as an accessible exercise that is easy to learn and appropriate as people age and suffer ill health or injury. Tai Chi is an activity that not only engages the body but the mind. The engagement of the mind lends to its meditative quality and prevents boredom. Furthermore, Tai Chi practitioners reported the beneficial effects it has on mental and physical health and recovery from injury. Leveraging these perceptions of Tai Chi practitioners in promoting this exercise to others is as essential to engaging more persons in this exercise as making classes and instruction for Tai Chi accessible to a diverse population in spite of disease and physical capacity.

Author Disclosure Statement

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Table 1. Participant responses arranged by theme

2a. Capacity-appropriate

Because of its smoothness and flowing motions Tai chi doesn't strain the joints or muscles (8)	<p>Low physical demand, Low physical consequences make it more accessible/appropriate/sustainable for range of people</p>
There is less stress on joints if taught & practiced correctly. (72)	
Can do it even if I feel unwell. (10)	
It can be practiced anywhere and by most people. (21)	
It is easier on my breather, I don't get so puffed as when I walk. (16)	
Gentler. Don't become breathless. (22)	
It is calming and invigorating rather than challenging and tiring (2)	
Smooth gentle stretching in a soft way, not explosive.(3)	
I will be able to continue tai chi long after giving tennis up. (34)	
it is an exercise which can be sustained for periods of time.(77)	
Other exercises eg jogging, you need to go round a big area. It is bad for the knee and ankle with every step you move.(30)	<p>Other exercises too taxing, injury-provoking, unsustainable</p>
unlike many other types of exercise it also doesn't require any expensive equipment and can be practiced anywhere. (36)	
suitable when other forms of exercise (eg long bushwalks) become too taxing with age (55)	
I was looking for an alternative exercise to yoga (one with which I didn't have to get down on the floor).(6)	
Other forms of exercise like gym and group sports like basketball cause me injuries but tai chi doesn't. But with continuing with my tai chi I can do my gym work because I can apply the principles of tai chi to it.(1)	

2b. Engaging activity

Your mind is involved, takes you really out of your daily work and stress(29)	<p>Physical and psychological engagement</p>
My mental focus is greater with tai chi.(71)	
It includes a mindfulness component, so ideally, the participant has to be mentally aware & attending at all times, in addition to moving limbs. It is about careful movement. (65)	
The engagement in the activity, the efforts it takes to learn & consolidate (65)	

Most other forms of exercise lack the internal focus linked to the mental focus. (72)	
I find it equally mental and physical. (34)	
There is an intensity that is not so much physical as it is inner strength...My idea of other forms of exercise is being more physically active with running, jumping, etc and more repetitions of a movement without a link to a function or intention. They also leave you feeling less energised unlike tai chi...(1)	More substance to tai chi than other exercises; Offers depth of practice
Tai chi is physically & mentally relaxing with appreciation of internal strength. These are missing in other forms of exercise.(67)	
Other exercises get boring. Tai chi offers many variations & has more depth.(65)	
It is non-repetitive & mentally challenging (11)	
I enjoy it & find it interesting as there are so many layers to it, like an onion.(10)	
Continuing to learn more on this journey!(22)	
...provides a healthful challenge over a long term.(26)	
More enjoyable than gym, exercise bike, etc.(53)	
Other exercises get boring. Tai chi offers many variations & has more depth.(65)	

2c. Enabling activity

I had a work accident. I was unable to get away from pain in my lower back. But after doing tai chi for 6 months my life improved - the pain has gone & I was much stronger. (59)	Aids recovery from injury and pain
Tai chi has given me significant benefit in recovering from a shoulder injury and joint alignment.(77)	
The health benefits help me live the lifestyle I want. (1)	Enables lifestyle, disease management, promotes control
I feel much better on days that I begin with tai chi practice. (6)	
It allows me to be in control of my body and my own health, to avoid medications and remain healthy despite chronic conditions. (7)	
My health improved from Tai Chi. People have commented I look so much healthier now.(24)	
Physically - pain relief, increased range of movement, greater ease within my body.(44)	
It helps my arthritis, relieves stiffness, increases muscle strength.(51)	
My leg problems - if I don't do tai chi I can't walk.(55)	

I want to manage my arthritis & maintain/improve my current physical abilities.(65)	
I could avoid getting surgery on my back.(29)	
I am more calm, grounded (43)	Perceived beneficial psychological outcomes
It has helped me improve my attitude towards life. To have a more balanced approach and to understand and go with the flow when appropriate.(49)	
Emotionally it helps me be better balanced and reach at times a state of inner peace. (7)	
It is the calm and peaceful space in an otherwise busy (and sometimes, chaotic) life.(36)	
I like the feeling of clarity and uplifting from practicing and the accumulative effect of daily practice.(41)	
Emotionally - the sense of personal achievement and integration of mind & body enables me to interact with others in a more satisfying manner.(44)	
I guess I really need the centering and calming down aspect of tai chi (56)	
Keeping calm and dealing with stress by relaxing (2)	
While giving me the same stress relief benefit of my yoga practice.(6)	
The calming benefit - you feel like you're floating after doing it.(28)	
The flowing and continuous movements gives a feeling of well-being.(45)	
The mental health and attitude change is more pronounced than other exercises. This motivates me further. (49)	