

Yoga and Tai Chi

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Tai Chi in the garden wasn't just fun for the clients who participated in Women's Day Out at the Atlanta Botanical Garden. It was also great for their bodies!

This relatively gentle form of martial arts is beneficial for improved range of motion, as well as circulation, balance and cardiac health, according to instructor Lori Rowe, who has a black belt in Tai Chi and has followed research studies at Emory and other universities. Some of the women at the garden event said they felt instant improvements in joint flexibility and increased energy. Others just felt very relaxed.

"Tai Chi is wonderful for all ages. But particularly with older adults, research is showing a big improvement in balance following regular Tai Chi practice," said Ms. Rowe, who was the instructor for HoG clients in May. "We often don't pay attention to how we're walking and how we are distributing our weight. Most people just pick up their feet and sort of throw them down with little awareness of how it's impacting the body. When problems come up, they are forced to become more aware and that is a good thing." Arthritis, hypertension and back problems are common complaints among those who take classes with her for improved health, she said.

The emphasis in Tai Chi, as with yoga (read more below), is on body awareness. In both ancient styles of movement, slow moving stretches and precise poses are mixed with meditation. By calming the mind and giving muscles a chance to extend and strengthen, the entire body benefits, she said. Research appears to support what practitioners have been saying for centuries. A study in the 1990s sponsored by the National Institute on Aging involved some of the nation's top names in Western medical science, including Emory University, Harvard, Yale, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Washington University School of Medicine.

"This study enrolled older individuals in the community who were otherwise healthy and strong, often identified as 'robust'," according to findings released by Emory. "The results showed that Tai Chi had the most profound effect in fall prevention, reducing the risks of multiple falls by 47.5 percent, when compared to balance training and wellness education alone." Yoga has similar benefits.

Hemophilia of Georgia clients had a chance to experience this first-hand when Beth Passehl, MS, Fit Kids Coordinator at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, shared her yoga expertise at Camp Wannaklot. Yoga was offered to males and females, but a girl's group was held to address specific issues.

Ms. Passehl, a certified yoga instructor and award-winning health advocate on the state and national level, said regular yoga practitioners can expect to experience improvements in strength, flexibility, balance, digestion, weight control, sleep and mental concentration and overall feelings of calm and well-being.

"Based on what it is we are planning specifically with the HoG girls, we wanted to focus on helping to calm and restore the nerves, to help with appetite control and help ease the symptoms of PMS," she said. Her guidance will be practical.

"We'll want to help the girls develop a few poses they could practice regularly throughout their cycles so that the actual menstruation is a bit easier to manage," she said. "Even doing just a little bit can help!" Ms. Passehl shared the very poignant comments of internationally known yoga instructor Patricia Walden: "The greatest gifts yoga brings you are those of strength, awareness, and self-love or acceptance. No matter how awkward you feel in "real life," a yoga class offers you a safe haven from your own insecurities and the judgments of others. The poses teach you to stand firm in your power, to reach out to the world from the core of your body. The strength you derive from yoga is emotional as well as physical. During yoga class, you are free to explore your own body, your own emotional needs and your own thoughts, unencumbered by the outside world."

The Internet is full of research findings on the benefits of yoga and Tai Chi. One good resource is <http://www.emory.edu/search.cfm>. Once there, type in tai chi study or yoga study in the search box for articles and study outcomes.

Happy stretching!