

Focus Group Report

Tai Chi for Health and Well-being in Long Term Health Conditions

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank each group member from the Haven for taking part in the focus group, as without them we would not have this information and about the benefits that tai chi movement can offer to those living with a long-term health condition and its suitability as a complementary therapy to help improve health and well-being. We would also like to thank Richard Farmer for organising the group to attend and Jan Dell at the Haven, for allowing us the use of their facilities.

Introduction

This report is based on the findings of a focus group that took place in July 2010 with service users from Haven, a charity organisation in Hereford for survivors of breast cancer plus additional information gathered in the form of a questionnaire completed by people currently living with a long-term health condition. This research was done with the aim of identifying whether tai chi would provide a suitable exercise-based therapy to help those living with a long-term health condition to manage their condition and improve their overall health and well-being.

With advances in medical technology and an aging population, increasing numbers of people are living with a long term health condition. Growing demands on health resources means there is an increasing necessity for those living with a long term health condition to actively engage in the management of their own condition, to improve physical health, mobility and well-being as a means to delay the effects of their illness and need for further treatment.

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese martial art that is integrated in traditional Chinese medicine which combines low-impact physical exercises and meditation with an aim to achieve physical and mental well-being. The slow, gentle movements and weight transfer mean that the benefits of tai chi for health can be accessed by a wide variety of people, including older adults and those with a disability. The helpfulness of tai chi practise in managing adjustment to long term health conditions is being increasingly recognised in western culture.

Research has shown that tai chi is safe and effective in promoting balance control, flexibility, and cardiovascular fitness (Wang, Collet & Lau, 2004). It is also associated with improvements in psychological well-being, including reduced depression and increased self-esteem (Wang, Bannuru, Ramel, Kupelnick, Scott & Schmid, 2010). The positive effect of tai chi on both physical and mental functioning makes tai chi relevant to those suffering from a wide range on long term health conditions. Li, Hong and Chan (2001) reviewed the beneficial effects of Tai Chi on health and concluded that tai chi exercise has "...great potential for health promotion and rehabilitation...of patients with cancer and other major health problems...".

Aim

To investigate what benefits tai chi practise may offer and to assess its suitability to be introduced as an accessible way of improving physical and mental well-being for people with long term health conditions in Herefordshire.

Methodology

Focus Group

What is a focus group?

The focus group is a group discussion in which approximately 6-8 people with a certain interest or characteristics in common have the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions on the topic in question. The focus group moderator guides the discussion with a series of planned questions to gain the relevant information and ensure each member of the group has the opportunity to contribute; however the group members are free to express their opinions in a comfortable, permissive environment. It is a way of exploring collective views and experiences, and to understand how people feel about a particular service through open discussion.

Design

A single focus group was held with breast cancer survivors who have been practising tai chi as a means to helping to manage their long term health condition. A semi-structured interview schedule was designed and used as a basis of discussion (see appendix 1). The focus group was designed to understand what tai chi practise may have to offer to people living with a long term health condition and to gain evidence that tai chi may provide a suitable and effective way to help people manage their long term health condition. The focus group was held at the Haven centre, Hereford. The group discussion was recorded and transcribed, and the key themes and ideas extracted from the transcription.

Participants

Seven participants took part in the focus group (approx age range 50-75 years). All participants were survivors of breast cancer, who had taken up tai chi through their involvement with the Haven, a charity based day centre providing support and complementary therapies to those living with breast cancer. Mean time since diagnosis was approximately 6 years. All participants currently or previously attended weekly tai chi sessions with tai chi master Richard Farmer, held at the Haven.

Ethical considerations

All participants gave their informed consent prior to taking part in the focus group (see appendix 2 for a copy of the consent form). Participants were told that they could not be identified in the final report and that their opinions would remain confidential. All participants understood that they were free to withdraw at any time, and were given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the focus group and how the data was going to be used before the start of the discussion.

Design

A self-report questionnaire was developed and handed out to those with a long-term health condition who have been practising tai chi to improve their health and well-being (see appendix 3 for a copy of the questionnaire). The questionnaire used a combination of multiple choice and open ended questions and the questions were targeted to reveal background information regarding the respondents' tai chi practise, how the respondents feel tai chi has affected their relationship with their LTHC and whether they feel tai chi has had any effect on a number of specific points of interest suggested by the research, including balance, confidence, ability to sleep, mood etc.

Common themes and key points were extracted from open-ended answers; whereas the most frequent (modal) response was calculated for each multiple choice question as a means of best representing the majority opinion.

Participants

Participants were recruited through Rising Dragon Tai Chi via a monthly newsletter sent to tai chi clients nationwide. Recipients were asked to complete the questionnaire if they practised tai chi and were living with a LTHC. The questionnaire was offered in paper format and as a link to an online survey. The questionnaire was also handed to participants of the focus group and participants of a separate 8-week pilot study, which looked into the benefits of tai chi for people with an acquired brain injury. There were no other inclusion or exclusion criteria as to who was eligible to complete the questionnaire.

Forty respondents (12 male, 27 female, 1 gender unknown; mean age= 53.3 S.D.= 15.2) completed the questionnaire online (21) or on paper (19). Most respondents were from the Birmingham, Hereford, Bristol or South Wales areas.

Ethical Considerations

All questionnaires were anonymous. Respondents were provided with a contact name and number for any questions regarding the nature of the research or the use of the information provided.

Results

Focus Group

This results section details the key themes that were extracted from the focus group discussion. The questions asked, and the responses given by the group, fell into 5 main themes:

1. What were your *reasons* for exploring tai chi as a complementary therapy?
2. What have been the *benefits* of doing tai chi?
3. What has been *difficult* about doing tai chi?
4. What *aspects* of tai chi are most important to helping you manage your long term health condition?
5. Other

1. What were your reasons for exploring tai chi as a complementary therapy?

What were your expectations of tai chi?

Many of the group members had previously participated in similar complementary exercise therapies, such as yoga, or had practised meditation prior to enrolling on the tai chi course. Because of this, most of them had some idea of what to expect from tai chi but were surprised by how much more they gained from the experience above and beyond their expectations. Many group members emphasized the importance of the meditation, not just the physical exercise, as contributing to the overall benefits of tai chi although most of them had not previously anticipated the important role meditation would play.

- *“Expected meditation”*
- *“It sounded nice and calming”*
- *“I have gained far more than I ever expected”*

What made you want to explore outside conventional treatments following your diagnosis?

“...We have all needed conventional medicine to some degree...but I was looking for something away from illness and into health. It makes other treatments better including taking all my medicines! It's a whole philosophy of nurturing ourselves...learning to love yourself...”

The main reasons for exploring outside conventional treatments and for enrolling in tai chi was to gain the social benefits of group based therapy and support, along with wanting to do something to improve overall health and well-being.

- *“I had done it previously and got benefit”*
- *“To exercise the whole body, mind and spirit”*
- *“I needed something to bring me back to normal”*
- *“For social benefit as well as exercise”*

How does tai chi differ from physiotherapy or other conventional treatments? Is tai chi compatible?

Although some of the moves are similar to that done in physiotherapy, the participants felt that tai chi had added benefits of being practiced as a group but also that it gives meaning to the exercises and makes them seem relevant to the self. They felt tai chi was very complementary to physiotherapy exercises.

- *"It is similar to physio' moves but I find the [physiotherapy] exercises boring – the [tai chi] group is doing something much more positive than just getting movement back in a limb"*
- *"I do the physio' exercises but they are perfunctory – it doesn't mean anything to me...there is no well-being connection"*
- *"Tai chi gave me the strength to take on new things. With my knowledge of tai chi...I accepted physio differently...I had enough strength to do the physio' exercises on my own at home and quite deliberately...I haven't wasted hospital money"*
- *"The breathing exercises make a big difference"*

2. What have been the benefits of doing tai chi?

What has been particularly beneficial for you from tai chi movement?

The main benefits of tai chi that seemed to be present throughout the whole discussion was the influence that tai chi has on their ability to relax, calm down and reduce anxiety. Other benefits included a feeling of empowerment of their health conditions, the benefits of physical exercise on fitness and pain and an overall positive effect on health and well-being.

- *"I have osteoporosis so weight bearing exercise is good and it helps my lymphoedema"*
- *"The grounding feeling"*
- *"I believe it boosts my immune system – I haven't had a cold in 5 years!"*
- *"I am still anxious but I go away feeling totally different with a more positive outlook"*
- *"I had severe radiotherapy burns and had lost a lot of confidence. Through tai chi I have regained a lot of my confidence"*
- *"It gives you the confidence that its ok to move your arm"*

How has tai chi affected your relationship with your cancer?

It was emphasized that tai chi had had a positive influence of their relationship with their cancer, allowing them to accept their condition rather than try to fight it, and that it helps create a feeling of being 'grounded'. They expressed it gave them a more positive outlook and has helped them overcome the feeling of being a victim to their cancer and put their illness in the past.

- *"The cancer is now in the background, its behind me, I've moved on."*
- *"I have become less anxious."*
- *"It has taken away the fear."*
- *"It's not going to solve everything but it leads to acceptance".*

- *"It allows you to be in the right frame of mind to see health professionals, to be receptive and accepting of treatments. It changes everything around!"*
- *"I go away feeling totally different...my life has changed since I started tai chi"*

Has tai chi had any effect on your:

- **Daily Activities, including levels of energy?**
 - *"I am more accepting of my energy levels...I feel less anxious about not having energy"*
 - *"I feel much more able to go on"*
- **Mood?**
 - *"I feel more positive"*
 - *"The movement 'return to self' has helped me cope with stress and crisis."*
 - *"Absolutely! It's been an enormous benefit!"*
 - *"I am calmer in stressful situations"*
- **Family and relationships?**
 - *"I am a lot easier to live with....now I feel the glass is half full and not half empty and this rubs off on other people".*
- **Physical health?**
 - *"I feel a lot better physically and my confidence and energy have increased"*
 - *"It helped me get my life back to normal and return to work"*

3. What has been difficult about doing tai chi?

The only difficulty that was expressed by a few of the group members was having to travel long distances to attend the sessions, but they all felt the benefits outweighed any of the difficulties. A number of the ladies said that Tai chi was their main priority in the week and that they always make sure they attend the sessions.

- *"The journey is a pain but I am always glad I came"*
- *"I can do it at home, I have a tape if I need it...If I can't get here I do it elsewhere."*

4. What aspects of tai chi are most important to helping you manage your long term health condition?

Do you think you benefit from being part of a group with other people with similar health issues?

Although the social benefits of tai chi as a group based therapy were expressed throughout the discussion, the participants were keen to express that the effects of tai chi go above and beyond, although they stated it is particularly important in the early stages following diagnosis and treatment. In particular they felt that the participating in the tai chi as a group and being around others with similar health conditions helped them with acceptance and ability to live with their cancer.

- *"Being part of the group is definitely part of it but there is so much more than that"*

Tai Chi for Health and Well-being in Long Term Health Conditions

- *“Initially the group is a benefit but now I can’t come [to the classes] I do it on my own”*

How important to you are the meditation and discussion elements of tai chi?

There was unanimous agreement that meditation and discussion were essential elements to the beneficial effect of tai chi on their ability to live with their long term health condition.

- *“I feel it is wonderful”*
- *“Talking and meditation is a terribly important part of it.”*
- *“Meditation is extremely helpful; I am more aware of stress and can relax”*
- *“I have been given permission to appreciate who I am”*

5. Other

The group also commented on comment on the necessity of the tai chi sessions being led by a suitably qualified and experienced instructor to really promote the beneficial effects and that it is important the instructor is aware of their health conditions and therefore know how to adapt the movements.

The entire group universally agreed that it was a positive intervention and would support its provision within the National Health Service without reservation.

Tai Chi and LTHC Questionnaire

Demographics

Respondent’s long term health condition included, among others, acquired brain injury, breast cancer, osteoarthritis, diabetes and hypothyroidism. Mean time since diagnosis was 11.7 years (S.D. = 13.8).

Most respondents have been practising tai chi for over three years; take part in weekly organised tai chi sessions; and practised tai chi more than once a week in their own time.

Areas of most/least benefit

On the whole, respondents thought that tai chi had effected/improved their balance and coordination, ability to sleep and relax, levels of anxiety, level of self-confidence and sense of personal or spiritual well-being ‘a lot’ (based on the modal response).

On the whole, respondents felt that tai chi had effected/improved their levels of fitness, levels of energy, ability to carry out everyday tasks, day-to-day mood, interpersonal relationships and overall health ‘quite a lot’.

The area of least benefit was strength and flexibility; most respondents felt that tai chi had only affected their strength and flexibility ‘A fair amount’.

Other benefits gained from tai chi practise

"I feel doing Tai Chi...has completely transformed my life inasmuch it has completely changed my understanding of who I am. I am much calmer, less likely to fly off the handle [and] more centered than I was before I started Tai Chi in 1995"

- *"Helps at times of anxiety and stress"*
- *"Improved posture"*
- *"Eased trapped nerve pain"*
- *"Non-strenuous activity that keeps me active"*
- *"A sense of being more centered or grounded in everyday life"*
- *"Very helpful with movement, confidence, breathing, companionship, calmness and coordination."*
- *"[Tai chi has] taken the pain away completely from knees. I couldn't really drive a car before doing Tai chi. Walking was difficult and climbing stairs very difficult. I can [do] both with relative ease now."*

Many respondents reported that tai chi had improved their relationship with their LTHC by increasing their acceptance, making them calmer and less pre-occupied with their condition. Many reported that they felt tai chi has been the most beneficial to them of any group-based therapies they have tried.

Difficulties faced

Most respondents did not report any difficulties relating to practising Tai chi. The most common difficulties that were reported was time commitment, memorising the movements and travel requirements.

Other

Thirty-eight out of 40 respondents said they would recommend tai chi to other people with a LTHC; the remaining 2 respondents said they might recommend tai chi to others.

- *"Only positive comments - no one need be excluded on basis of age, fitness [or] disability."*
- *"[I] Enjoy having continuous classes - not a fixed programme"*
- *"[I] Only attended twice, could be helpful for others."*

Conclusion

The participants of the focus group felt that tai chi had been greatly beneficial to them, both in terms of improving overall well-being but also as vital in improving their relationship with their cancer. The group felt tai chi improved their outlook and gave them more strength and motivation to engage with conventional therapies, thereby improving their recovery. The benefits described in the discussion went beyond the physical benefits of exercise and extended to include psychosocial benefits as well. Similar ideas were echoed in the responses to the tai chi and LTHC questionnaire.

Most focus group members took up tai chi practise because they wanted something to help towards an overall sense of well-being and to help them manage the personal difficulties of living with a long term health condition, and they had not found this support was currently being offered through conventional treatments. This indicates there is a demand for more holistic approaches to treatment that consider the individuals mental well-being, ability to cope and quality of life as well as physical health. The members of this focus group felt that tai chi had offered them this support through means of mediation and discussion while also providing gentle exercise to help ward off the side effects of their treatments, such as lymphoedema.

The wide ranging and holistic benefits of tai chi were highlighted by the tai chi and LTHC questionnaire; participants had found tai chi had lead to considerable improvement in balance, ability to relax and levels of self-confidence and personal well-being. Benefits such as these are likely to represent a meaningful and important improvement in well-being and quality of life for those who are living with a long-term health condition. Improvements in balance, coordination and self-confidence are likely to also have important implications for ability to engage and benefit from physiotherapy and other conventional rehabilitation programmes.

All people that were asked expressed that they would recommend tai chi to others with a long term health condition, as they felt it was suitable for everyone and offered far more than could be gained from conventional treatments. The only difficulties with tai chi expressed by some participants were problems with travelling long distances to get to the classes each week and a few people expressed some difficulty remembering the movements between classes. This provides good reason for more tai chi programmes to be introduced across the area so that the benefits of tai chi practise can be accessed easily by more people living with a long term health condition.

References

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Appendix 1 – Semi structured interview schedule

Tai Chi Focus Group Questions

1. Please tell us your name and how long since you were diagnosed with breast cancer.
2. Think back to before you started tai chi – what were your expectations about tai chi? Did it meet your expectations? Is there anything you gained from tai chi that you didn't expect?
3. Had you considered doing tai chi before your diagnosis? If not, what made you want to explore outside conventional treatments after your diagnosis?
4. How does tai chi differ from physiotherapy or other conventional treatments? Do you find tai chi is compatible with conventional treatments?
5. Do you think you benefit from being part of a group with other people with similar health issues?
6. What has been particularly beneficial to you from tai chi movement?
7. What has been particularly difficult or frustrating about tai chi?
Prompts: Time commitment, travel time, expense, difficulty following movements
8. Do you feel any different having done tai chi? How has it affected your relationship with your cancer?
9. Has tai chi had any effect, positive or negative, on your:
 - Daily activities, including levels of energy or fatigue?
Prompts: Ability to manage household tasks? Shopping?
 - Mood, including levels of anxiety or depression?
 - Family and personal relationships?
 - Physical health, including balance and coordination?
10. How important to you are the meditation and discussion elements of tai chi?
11. Would you recommend tai chi to others with a long term health condition?
12. We wanted you to help us evaluate this approach to the management of long term health conditions. Is there anything we have missed? Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience?

Appendix 2 – Consent form



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Consent Form

Title of research: Tai Chi Movement for Well-being in Long Term Health Conditions

Focus Group Lead: Dr. David Quinn, Consultant Neuropsychologist and Head of Health Psychology and Caroline Blake, Honorary Assistant Psychologist. Department of Health Psychology, Belmont.

Please TICK boxes:

- 1) I understand what my participation within this focus group will involve. I have had a chance to ask any questions about the focus group and I am happy with the answers provided.
- 2) I understand that my taking part is voluntary and I am able to change my mind at any time, without giving any reason. If I do change my mind I would be able to talk to someone about the use of any information I have given.
- 3) I am happy for the information that I give to be used in any report
- 4) I agree to have my focus group audio tape-recorded and to have some written notes taken during the focus group.
- 5) I understand that I will not be named in any reports, and that any information I give cannot be traced back to me.
- 6) I agree to take part in the focus group.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT (CAPITALS)	DATE	SIGNATURE

NAME OF RESEARCHER (CAPITALS)	DATE	SIGNATURE

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How do you feel Tai Chi has effected/improved your (please circle the most appropriate answer):

5. Balance and coordination?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

6. Strength and flexibility?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

7. Level of fitness?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

8. Levels of energy?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

9. Ability to carry out everyday tasks (such as housework, shopping, job)?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

10. Ability to relax/sleep?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

10. Day to day mood (including levels of depression)?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

11. Levels of anxiety?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

12. Level of self-confidence?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

13. Sense of personal or spiritual well-being?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

14. Relationships with family, friends or significant other?

Tai Chi for Health and Well-being in Long Term Health Conditions

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

15. Overall health?

Not at all A little A Fair Amount Quite a lot A Lot

16. Are there any other benefits you have gained from doing Tai Chi not mentioned above? (please describe these benefits)

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.....

17. Is there anything you have found particularly difficult or frustrating about doing Tai Chi (e.g. difficulty following the movements, remembering to practise, time commitment, difficulties travelling to/from sessions, expense)?

.....
.....

18. If you have done any other group based therapy since your diagnosis, what was it and how has Tai Chi compared?

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19. Have you found Tai Chi has affected your relationship with your condition?

If so, in what way has it had an effect?

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.....

20. Would you recommend Tai Chi to other people with a long term health condition? YES / MAYBE / NO

Tai Chi for Health and Well-being in Long Term Health Conditions

21. Do you have any other comments regarding Tai Chi or your experience?

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.....
.....

Thank you for your time.