

coverstories

BREATHE DEEPLY, MOVE SLOWLY

Ancient Chinese energy practice qigong helps heal body & mind

By Laura Martin
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For years, getting out of bed in the morning was difficult for Catherine Sas. The Tinton Falls resident suffers from fibromyalgia, a chronic condition that causes widespread pain and fatigue. A mother of five, Sas was desperate for relief when she discovered qigong, an ancient Chinese practice that integrates gentle, slow movements, deep-breathing techniques and intense mental focus. Working with Chinese medicine prac-

itioner Shoshanna Katzman, Sas began a regimen of qigong, tai chi and acupuncture. Today, her condition is significantly more manageable, Sas says. "It saved my life," Sas says. "Qigong helps you heal yourself. I don't have to use any outside medications." She's not alone. Enthusiasts will convene this week at the fifth International Health Qigong Tournament at the Sheraton Parsippany. Sas's results from qigong (pronounced chi-gong) are common, says Katzman, who teaches qigong at her acu-

puncture and wellness practice in Red Bank. Unlike tai chi—a similar Chinese practice that incorporates elements of martial arts—qigong was designed solely for health and healing purposes. The word qigong means "to cultivate vital energy." During her 25 years of practice, Katzman has taught qigong to clients looking for relief from sports injuries, chronic pain or fatigue, digestive disorders, cancer, diabetics, lung problems, arthritis,



Qigong helps with pain and stiffness, says Mei Jin Lu, the founder and president of the Florham Park-based U.S. Health Qigong Association. Lu is practicing qigong. COURTESY OF MEI JIN LU

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QIGONG

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anxiety and more.

"Just a few simple exercises really help people stay healthy," Katzman says. Many of the physical benefits of qigong come from its slow, deliberate movements from pose to pose, says Henry McCann, a doctor of acupuncture and oriental medicine based in Madison.

The "mindful movement" aspect of qigong helps with balance and stability, he says. This is particularly beneficial to seniors who are at risk of falling.

"There is real attention paid to exactly what is happening when you are moving your physical body," says McCann, who founded the Institute for Classical Asian Medicine, a teaching facility in Madison. "Most of the time when people are walking, they are just putting one foot in front of each other and not paying attention. Qigong focuses the attention on how you are shifting your balance from one foot to the other."

While the poses used in qigong are simple, they still stretch the tendons and muscles, improving flexibility, Katzman says.

Qigong also can help with chronic pain and stiffness, says Mei Jin Lu, the founder and president of the U.S. Health Qigong Association, a nonprofit organization based in Florham Park.

"People that are working in the office for too long can get up out of the office and go to the lawn and do a few moves," says Lu, who is also the co-owner of the Mt. Tabor Healing Center in Morris Plains. "It is really a good way to prevent yourself from getting pain."

A major element of qigong is its breathing techniques, which are coordinated with each movement. Slowing down and deepening the breath has many positive health outcomes, Katzman says.

An increase in oxygen in the system nourishes the nerves, muscles and blood, which can increase longevity, she says.

Focusing on the breath can help those suffering from lung problems as well, Lu says. She had a client with lung disease who couldn't even walk one flight of stairs when she came to Lu's healing center. Regular qigong breathing exercises increased her oxygen level and lung capacity, dramatically improving her condition, Lu says.

Chinese medicine also teaches that certain ways of breathing can improve a person's "qi," or energy, which is believed to be vital to overall health, Lu says.

"If you have a headache, you become frustrated and stressed," Lu says. "After you breathe in and bring in that qi, that is the Eastern medicine side, and that oxygen, which is the Western medicine side, your headache starts to decrease, and you feel good, and you are taken by that



Deep breathing and slow movements are an integral part of qigong, says Red Bank qigong instructor Shoshanna Katzman, showing a qigong pose. COURTESY OF SHOSHANNA KATZMAN

THE FIFTH INTERNATIONAL HEALTH QIGONG TOURNAMENT

WHEN: Tuesday, Aug. 20 and Wednesday, Aug. 21

WHERE: Sheraton Parsippany Hotel, 199 Smith Road, Parsippany

WHAT: Exhibitions and demonstrations of qigong

TICKETS: A limited number of complimentary tickets to observe certain times of the tournament are available; email lynnflushing@yahoo.com

moment of calm and peace, which reduces stress."

Connecting the mental and the physical is essential to practicing qigong.

Qigong students are instructed to do specific visualizations, focus only on their breath and movements or to not think of anything at all. These techniques are believed to strengthen and calm the mind.

"This is not just an exercise," Katzman says. "It is about focusing on turning negatives into positives. It is a practice that applies to how you live your life and how you are in your relationships with others."

In today's busy world, taking time to clear the mind and slow down can be extremely beneficial to emotional well-be-



ing, McCann says. Many of his clients who struggle with anxiety and stress find relief from qigong. Physical conditions linked to stress, like high blood pressure, also can be treated with qigong, he says.

He makes it a habit to practice qigong regularly for his mental health, regardless of how busy he is.

"I see patients for 10 to 12 hours a day, and even when I feel exhausted, if I can get myself to just stand there and do it, I just feel so much better," he says. "For me, it was one of the most rejuvenating things I have ever done."

Fred Olving of Hazlet has been using qigong to help deal with stress off and on for the last 25 years. He says qigong, along with other Chinese healing arts, has transformed his life and made him a much calmer, more peaceful person.

"I used to drive a car with my hands gripped to the wheel, and I would get out

A SAMPLING OF PLACES THAT OFFER QIGONG

Red Bank Acupuncture and Wellness Center
830 Broad St., Shrewsbury
www.healing4u.com, 732-758-1800

NORTH JERSEY CENTER FOR ACUPUNCTURE AND ORIENTAL MEDICINE
300 Madison Ave., Madison
www.newjerseyacupuncture.com
973-660-0110

TAICHIUSA
177 Main St., East Brunswick
www.taichiusa.com, 732-238-1414

PARIS SPEED SCHOOL
Hosted by Mei Jin Lu of Mt. Tabor Healing Center
100 The American Road, Morris Plains
973-887-2255 or email meijin@meijinlu.com

of the car, and I would be stressed out," he says. "Now, after doing qigong, I relax my eye muscles, my grip. I sit up straight, and I breathe, and I get out feeling ready to go."

Although qigong can be an effective way to treat mental and physical issues, Katzman, Lu and McCann all stress that it, and other similar Eastern medical practices, are not a total replacement for modern, or Western, medicine.

"It is all about harmony," Lu says. "That is the thing that is really important—harmony of East and Western medicine. One thing cannot do all. Both types of medicine need to coexist, and we should learn from each other."

Katzman, who holds a master's degree in sports medicine, often works in conjunction with Western medical doctors. A patient with high blood pressure for example, may need both qigong and medication to treat the issue, she says.

"I am a very East-West person," she says. "I recommend people to medical doctors, nutritionists, psychotherapists. It is very important that people still see a Western doctor for Western issues."

Unlike some modern medical fixes that require nothing more than taking a pill, qigong takes time to make a difference in health, Olving says. He saw changes in his own health happening subtly after he began qigong.

"People want instant gratification, and you aren't going to get that with qigong," he says. "To get results, you have to work at it."

Anyone willing to put in the time will see positive results from qigong, says McCann. Although it is typically done standing up, qigong can easily be adapted to accommodate any physical restriction. McCann has taught qigong to those in their 80s and 90s and to his son's kindergarten class.

"I believe firmly if all my patients learned qigong, I would be out of work because they would be much healthier," he says.