

The following article was written by T'ai Chi teacher Trevor Reynaert, and was published in Dr Paul Lam's newsletter in April 2010:

Twilight T'ai Chi - Modifying TC for nursing care homes

During 2008 my 86 year old mother with mild dementia suffered a severe stroke which necessitated her having to move into a residential nursing care home. Hearing that I had run TC sessions for arthritis for people with general age-related frailty in other residential homes, I was asked if I could adapt anything to provide movement and exercise for their residents, the majority of whom were chair-bound with varying degrees of dementia, often compounded by stroke or Parkinson's.

The challenge was set – could I adapt form for them? Meeting the residents I soon realised that in order to stimulate an hour or so of interest and fun, whatever we did must create attention and encouragement to each individually, yet enable them to work together as a group. Daunting though this seemed, after much thought and deliberation I decided to give it a try using an approach inspired by Dr Paul and Cheryl's TC for Kidz program.

The day arrived to start, and for me to become an extrovert with spontaneous unscripted “one-liners” to maintain the fun! Everyone is sitting around the room with me and as many helpers as I can muster in the centre so that we can interact with everyone. We turn on the music and the show begins. Using a mixture of Paul's warm-up movements, conventional form movements and qi gong, it's “follow me” time - the only difference being that each movement is described in a fun way relating them to animals or everyday familiar actions.

We start as monkeys dangling arms to hang loose, then after circling arms upwards a few times to pull down the warm sun above, we look sideways at our faces in a “mirror” held in our hand (mine's the ugly one). Reaching up with each arm “picking apples (or B...’s fruit choice of the day) and putting them in a basket” we then “push the tree” a few times to dislodge the last one.

Using this concept we have developed dozens of other “modified” movements. Dragon “washes his face”, then we pick up a towel to “dry the face” (recognisable as TCA warm up #1), further exercising neck, shoulder and arms. D.... loves “stroking the birds tail” then being a “bear” (rolling punch), and opening arms to “brush away bees” before kicking over the bee hive to get at the honey. M..... loves drawing a bow to “shoot an arrow” at me. Everyone has their favourite.

To purists this may not seem like conventional tai chi, but I soon found that the technique has enabled the majority to remember and relate to at least one action. Even those with little or no retention start to join in and copy gentle movement, especially when encouraged a little. Many minds working together. Everyone's movement varies and often may not resemble mine – but they are joining in. Those with limited movement caused by a stroke are encouraged by helpers to move the affected limbs as much as possible, and the lady with Parkinson's specifically encouraged by the simple, gentle 5 element qi gong movements.

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Kicks are supplemented by a seated “golden cockerel standing on one leg” (cock-a-doodle-do shouts someone), again this stimulates holistic coordinated movement, as does “stroking the birds tail”. “Tying the coat” throws a custard pie into a neighbour's face, and gently moves shoulders, elbows and wrists. Sun style “yin and yang rolls into one”, stimulates wrist movement and mental activity. To resident-led chants of “up the wall, along the roof, etc.”, we draw a picture of a house in the air as we perform Sun style “cloud hands”.

Early on in the program I demonstrated fan form for added interest. Everyone loved it, the opening crack, the graceful movement. Soon we had purchased fans for everyone. With a salute and bow, V.... and her friends open the fan with a synchronisation that would be the envy of my regular class, stimulating wrist action. Folding movements, figures of eight, closed upwards and downward thrusts, all extend the already extensive movement range of the hand forms, and adds achievement and interest.

The best part of a session is towards the end. By now most have joined in. It's time for some real TC. We all salute and helpers Jools and Rosemary join me in a conventional form, (TCA, TCD, even Sun 73) - one difference though - I call out the form using the terms that everyone knows. To the amazement of visitors and those passing the door, the whole room is doing coordinated tai chi in their own adapted differing ways. They are exercising, having fun and interacting.

Sessions can be tinged with sadness when a familiar face is no longer with us, but their place is soon taken by another, confused and uncertain at first, but very soon to become part of the fun. What started out as a daunting experiment, that is definitely hard work to lead, has proved so wonderfully rewarding for the 20 or so residents who join in and for those of us helping them. If anyone who teaches TC has the opportunity to try it, don't be put off when presented with a roomful of people in the twilight of their lives, sitting staring at each other. Use your TC skills to create holistic movement, spread chi, and with encouragement they will collectively interact. Even those towards the bottom of the dementia score will still usually show enjoyment.

Sadly my mother passed away soon after we started, but was there for my first session. She had spent her life helping those less fortunate than herself and I'm sure that now she is looking down with approval on the legacy that her unfortunate illness has inadvertently created.

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