

Psycho-social Benefits
of
Taekwon-Do

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My Experience

Taekwon-Do has been a life changing experience for me, it has made me the person I am today. When I was young though I was the oldest sister I would get walked all over as I would not assert myself nor was I confident. As with most people I struggled with public speaking which also had to do with confidence. The first time I went to Taekwon-Do I was very nervous, I was fourteen and the breathing was certainly something I found difficult. As I began to thrive and progress through the ranks my self confidence increased and I was a lot more certain of who I was and this helped to deal with difficult situations. Taekwon-Do also taught me how to apply myself and work at things even though it may be difficult and through gradings and demonstrations I learnt to perform under pressure. Competition has taught me to be humble and also provide goals to train towards.

Through my T.E.E. studies at high school Taekwon-Do helped me concentrate as I would study for an hour then I would practice a pattern then I would be able to apply myself again and study some more. Other benefits that are underestimated I believe is the fact that through learning many patterns and the technical aspects it tests your memory and ability to recall information when required even under stress.

Taekwon-Do is a way of life to me and has helped me both physically and mentally, but it is through physical difficulties that the mental strength I have developed through Taekwon-Do that I have gained the most. In my early twenties I was diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis which is part of the rheumatoid arthritis family and a bone condition which would cause pain mainly in my lower back but could vary at any time. I found it rather difficult to be active dealing with the pain as I used to play basketball as well, it was through Taekwon-Do and the ability to break the movements down and the mental aspects such as the philosophy such as doing those things that are worth doing even though they are difficult and to not allow my physical limitations stop me from practicing Taekwon-Do. It took me at least a year to adjust to fixing my line work and not being able to go fast or snap a kick when I wanted to and instead had to work up to it. It is through this training and the support and direction given by my instructor that gave me the motivation and strength to not give up and instead persist even when there was pain but to take the good with the bad. As there are many physical benefits of Taekwon-Do there are also many mental, psycho-social benefits gained from the practice and study of Taekwon-Do.

The Benefits

The physical benefits of Taekwon-Do are well known but the psychological benefits are not as well publicised. There are also claims that training in a martial art such as Taekwon-Do can make you more aggressive, this will be addressed based on studies and research. The question is also raised whether the benefits from Taekwon-Do training are any different than participation in other sports.

There have been little studies that have examined short term effects of Taekwon-Do and other martial arts. One study did assess the effects based on a single session of jogging, weight lifting or taijiquan and showed it reduced tension, anxiety, depression and anger hostility but a session in karate didn't. The activity level of the karate was lower than the taijiquan class, therefore a linkage has been made that a certain level of activity is required to reduce stress levels.

The long term effects of martial arts training have had many studies that have shown positive psychosocial changes. The study by Duthie et al (1978) found that there is a positive correlation between the length of time practicing or belt rank and the level of self confidence, self esteem and self reliance. In another study by Nosanchuck and MacNeil (1989) they found an inverse relationship between rank and aggression in students who studied in traditional settings. These studies show how the practice of Taekwon-Do over time can reduce aggression, increase self confidence, self esteem and self reliance.

Taekwon-Do has many benefits the same as other physical activities such as fitness, skill acquisition and social activity. There are some differences that can be drawn between many Western sports and Asian martial arts, western sports tend to emphasise competition and winning whereas Asian martial arts such as Taekwon-Do teach self defence, and involve philosophical and ethical teachings to be applied to life. There is also a high degree of ceremony and ritual involved with Asian martial arts such as Taekwon-Do, respect is shown by bowing to your instructor, the student oath that is said at the beginning of class.

Patterns

One of the main teachings is patterns that are various fundamental movements which represent an attack or defence technique in a logical sequence. The challenge a pattern represents helps a person learn and understand the different techniques involved and provide repetition to help learn the movements. As a student progresses they learn a new pattern each time while having to still practice and retain what they previously learnt of the other patterns. The advancement through the ranks in Taekwon-Do help with self esteem and confidence as you start as a white belt and learn a basic pattern and as you progress you are graded and move onto the next pattern to learn which is gradually more challenging. This natural progression between ranks and patterns gives a sense of achievement to the student and also helps their confidence as the number of techniques learnt increases as you progress through the patterns. Patterns also provide a form of meditation as it provides a train of thought process and focus that tests the physical and mental abilities of the Taekwon-Do practitioner.

Self Confidence

Through the development of one self and the work involved to execute the many different techniques in Taekwon-Do it challenges that person in different ways. The sense of achievement when a technique is executed correctly helps build a person's self confidence. Taekwon-Do uses various parts of the body and at varying angles which mean that the body may find it difficult at times to achieve the required technique. It is through persistence and practice that an individual can correct their technique and conditioning of the body to enable more difficult techniques to be achieved. The natural progression through the grades also help with self confidence as you learn new techniques and patterns and are tested on different aspects with each grade. The use of belt ranks gives a sense of achievement as the testing is both physically and mentally demanding and over time that individual's confidence grows with each rank.

Part of self esteem development is through the satisfaction in performance, this is helped by the instructor through directed learning and positive reinforcement. An instructor of Taekwon-Do normally shows the students how to execute a technique and explain the movement. It is through this instruction that directed learning is applied and positive reinforcement is used when the student gets the technique correct. As they are improving

they are directed on how to fix the problems from their instructor which helps reinforce that they are improving. Using positive reinforcement encourages people to do the technique again which can help keep students training in Taekwon-Do as it makes them feel good about themselves and want to keep trying.

The instructor is very important in Taekwon-Do and for the student's development as their behaviour and attitude can be adopted as one's own. If the instructor is highly regarded then becoming like them has a high positive reinforcing effect. This can also mean the instructor can motivate change. Taekwon-Do has many different areas of specialisation and varying degrees of difficulty that it can enable the student to see growth and improvement of their own performance even amidst partial failure, this is only if positive reinforcement and behaviour by the instructor creates that environment. The student's self esteem is part of self concept and through guided instruction and positive behaviour the student is enabled to see alternative patterns of participation to offset structural limitations. This is displayed when at the beginning as a white belt you are required to do push ups and sit ups as part of the conditioning in the class but the limit is set at ten for the class, as that student starts they find that they are unable to do ten but instead of quitting they decide to do five and work from there as a goal. Under the guidance of the instructor the class can create an honest and nurturance environment where individuals are able to grow as their structural limitations may be reduced or an alternative is process is shown.

Self defence is another aspect of Taekwon-Do that attracts a lot of people but what it also does is empowers that person and develops a confidence in their own abilities. The ability to be able to defend yourself helps your self confidence and also shows to other people that they are someone who is neither a victim nor a pushover. Attacks that happen against women are usually about power and because they are seen as a target that is easily overpowered. This also can be to do with how they carry themselves or the body language displayed, if the head is down and shoulders slumped it shows someone who is not confident therefore Taekwon-Do can be a great help in improving that person's confidence and self esteem.

Concentration

Concentration is another benefit that is developed through the repetition of techniques whether it is through patterns, one step sparring or fundamental drills. The concentration that is required to develop a punch in the correct manner based on the theory of power educates a student on how it should be and what is required. Mental concentration is developed through practice and creating a pattern of concentration such as in a class repetition can sometimes be the only way to learn your patterns or create a reflex action for a kick.

Power breaking and special techniques are examples where the application of the fundamental movements are used to test the ability of the person, this through concentration of power but also the mental ability to focus at one point to execute the technique correctly and break the board whilst dealing with the fear of hurting themselves. Competitions, demonstrations and gradings are all areas where there are outside pressures and distractions to the person but are a great test where one learns to deal with their surroundings and having to recall from memory and perform in front of people. The execution of the techniques even for breaking boards or tiles and having to concentrate on the matter at hand and ignore the surroundings, these are areas which though one may fail or make mistakes it can also motivate the person to perform better next time. Sometimes people need the pressure to push them to perform at their best and apply themselves.

During competition for example the person will identify positive and negative self statements towards their performance and this is where the coach or instructor is helpful as they can guide the person to positive self statements rather than negative self statements. Under this guidance from the instructor the person can refocus and achieve their best, without this help they may focus on the negative self statements. The way to improve concentration is about learning what to attend to when and what to ignore, the instructor guides the person on how to do this for example when trying to learn a pattern you don't concentrate on just how to execute the technique correctly instead get the whole picture by learning the moves then concentrate on perfecting each technique. (Oglesby, 1981 p.34)

In the Lantz study (2002) some parents discussed that their children had issues focusing but also some of them were diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactive disorder. Martial arts was prescribed by some therapists as an aid, even though the medication was of benefit,

what did help was that the children responded well to the discipline and found under the right instructor that it helped them focus. A parent even found that watching the instructor interact with the children taught them how to deal with the child in the way that would give them a positive response.

Respect

The protocol on how you are to behave in class dictates that you must bow to people and if you don't then you can be reprimanded. At the beginning of class the student oath is said and this advises the behaviour that is expected. Due to the way everyone in the class behaves as a new person you would be an outsider and be perceived disrespectful if you didn't learn the etiquette that is required when practicing Taekwon-Do. I have seen difficult children at the beginning of their training forget the bowing and would act out and not listen, then over time and exposure to the environment they start to change and listen and learn to respect others.

The training also teaches you to respect yourself and learn to look after yourself as this will help you advance. The Taekwon-Do environment is a structured class that has formality and the expectations are made clear and in an atmosphere that people are treated fairly and treated with respect. This is great for those people especially children who have probably making friends and don't have the social skills to approach people, the respect that is upheld in class mean that there is a general acceptance of anyone no matter who they are.

Friendship

Taekwon-Do is considered an individual sport but you are normally training with a group of people in class. It is through this interaction that you meet different people and develop friendships with people who are outside your normal circle of friends. These people help support you and give direction if needed and can also motivate and challenge the person such as in sparring which you can't practice alone. This also means that you interact with people you may not normally associate with and that give the person exposure to other peoples beliefs.

The Taekwon-Do environment that is created dependent on the instructor can create interpersonal support with the groups of people that they train with. The training environment can produce a positive environment for healthy social interaction which is a need by human beings called affiliation tendency. The discipline and how one is required to interact with people during class whether it is through sparring or self defence training or teaching others, the environment helps develop good social skills. There is also a need for feedback and evaluation and through the training and interaction with others and the instructor one is able to achieve this. The class also provides a safe environment where those who may not normally find it easy to make friends gives them a chance to interact without the fear of rejection and bullying.

Moral Development

The moral culture that is taught by the instructor and philosophy that is emphasised in Taekwon-Do teaches individuals how to behave to one another, for example when in class you have to help each other with stretching. The diversity of people of all ages and religious backgrounds who participate within the classes develops tolerance and understanding.

The tenets of Taekwon-Do are courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self control and indomitable spirit and it is these concepts that are used as a guide on how one is to behave that trains in this martial art. Though these may be simple concepts nowadays the general teachings in life through school and parents can be lost due to lack of guidance and time. In the study by Jim Lantz parents were interviewed on how their children were helped by martial arts, the main theme that was found was learning what's right and wrong. They are taught about honour and respect and the tenets and oath that are said in class are to be applied in life not just in class.

Mood Changes

The training in a martial art can sometimes be perceived that it will increase a person's aggression but in actual fact the research shows that it can have the opposite affect. The study conducted by Trulson (1986) identified juvenile delinquents and were assigned to one of three groups. The first group received traditional Taekwon-Do training (lecture and

meditation included) while the second received modern Taekwon-Do training (only physical techniques) and the third group received a program of increased physical activity. After six months the students from the first group in traditional Taekwon-Do showed a decrease in aggression and anxiety while the second group showed an increase in delinquency and aggression. This study emphasised the importance of the moral culture, tenets and meditation aspects of Taekwon-Do that should be taught to help students and not just the physical activity side.

There is other research that indicates that martial arts such as Taekwon-Do help reduce behavioural problems in children (Gonzalez, 1989). In Toskovic (2001) novice Taekwon-Do students were studied and found that a single bout of a dynamic training session produced immediate positive changes in mood and a decrease in negative mood. The way that Taekwon-Do teaches breath control and the concepts of energy, timing and positioning which are all part of the secrets of Taekwon-Do are very similar concepts for psychological treatments used by therapist which have an underlying theme as with Taekwon-Do that it is about knowing oneself and the people around us.

Summary

There have been many studies that have examined the benefits of taekwondo and other martial arts and it is interesting to see that the majority of research has found it leads to positive psychosocial changes. Though the specifics of how martial arts such as Taekwon-Do really bring about these changes it does address ethical, moral, spiritual and meditative components. Taekwon-Do produces more positive psychosocial changes in diversity and magnitude than other physical activity and this would be because of the non exercise related such as moral culture and the learning environment.

There is a great emphasis placed on how good the instructor is but there are other benefits drawn by just participating in Taekwon-Do and its different applications. It was discussed that the patterns provide a train of thought process and focus. Directed learning and positive reinforcement are how an instructor and other students can help each other to build self esteem and produce satisfaction in their performance. The environment in which they are taught is important as it needs to be honest and nurturance. As there are many different

specialities in taekwondo and various applications through guided instruction and positive behaviour one can learn alternative patterns of participation even with limitations.

The relevance and need for good instruction and coaching especially in competition was identified and how positive self statements towards their performance are how one can guide the student and improve their concentration. The reassurance and guidance from an instructor or coach helps prevent that person concentrating on negative self statements. Other benefits identified through the studies were the friendship and respect that one attains and the social skills and good manners that help people function better in society. Moral development is an integral part of Taekwon-Do's teachings and is something that isn't attained through any normal physical activity and has been proven to help with many psychosocial areas. Mood alteration was another benefit that has been researched many times and the results constantly show reduced aggression and anxiety. There has been a lot of different studies with Taekwon-Do and examining different parameters but the consistent theme throughout is that there are many positive psychosocial benefits that may not be received from other activities.

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