

Tai Chi for Veterans 'hits the mark'

good therapy



TYLER DAGUE
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



FEB 7, 2021

12:00 AM

Chris Hitchens knew he had to make a change.

Medical issues and joint pain forced him to retire after 26 years teaching chemistry at Peters Township High School. His doctors suggested meditation and yoga, but he settled on tai chi.

Before long, he became a certified tai chi instructor through the TaijiFit International wellness program and started teaching in the South Hills. In 2019, the Veterans Administration Mission Act expanded the range of treatment options the VA fully covered under insurance. Tai chi was one of them.



Once the act was passed, Mr. Hitchens looked for his own physical location to run classes. In March 2020, he opened Three Treasures Health and Wellness center in the former Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Bethel Park, a week before the coronavirus pandemic hit. While he had to pare down and close for a time, the facility is now open at

“around 10%” capacity and offers meditation, Pilates and yoga in addition to tai chi.

The Veterans Administration Community Care Network began the official Tai Chi for Veterans program, and instructors were vetted as VACCN providers by TaijiFit International as the program rolled out across the country. Mr. Hitchens became one of them.

Three Treasures now is the only wellness facility in the Pittsburgh area to offer Tai Chi for Veterans, which is fully insured for veterans and their caregivers through the VA.

“I love the science behind it,” Mr. Hitchens said. “There’s a number of chemical reactions going on in the body when you do a meditative process. Tai chi has many healing benefits with chronic pain. It’s an anti-inflammatory. It helps with mobility, high blood pressure, lower cortisol levels in the body, which cause a lot of health issues. So, it helped me a great deal.”



Tai chi, an ancient Chinese tradition, combines graceful, low-impact movements based on martial arts with a focus on controlling breathing. Mr. Hitchens said Three Treasures often functions as a teaching facility and encourages clients to incorporate meditation and breathing techniques into their everyday lives.

Now that classes are available through the program, Mr. Hitchens hopes he’ll be able to partner with local veterans’ organizations to provide the service. He has also offered live Zoom classes for in-home sessions.

Clayton Crosley, a 10-year Army veteran, had been a volunteer tai chi instructor in VA clinics for six years when he decided to consult his doctor about the Tai Chi for Veterans program. After the consultation, he met with his instructor for weekly 45-minute sessions. Soon Mr. Crosley was teaching in the program, too.



He emphasized the number of chronic pain and mobility issues helped through tai chi, and he noted the Tai Chi for Veterans version is modified to help with accessibility. He recalled a Vietnam War veteran who had trouble with balance and had a slight tremor. When the veteran focuses on the meditative movements, “his tremor diminishes to the point where it

doesn't exist.”

“I think this is where it really hits the mark, especially for veterans,” Mr. Crosley said. “It helps you calm down and feel a little more relaxed and balanced. The breathing and the moving really helps manage PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. I think that's a really important thing to be able to not only experience but offer, working with veterans.”

Mr. Crosley and Mr. Hitchens met through the program as colleagues and have been excited to see the profile of Tai Chi for Veterans raised in the Pittsburgh area. They say the classes provide the social component veterans often miss upon leaving the military and credit the VA for reacting quickly to the pandemic, providing setups for instructors to provide telehealth appointments.

“Tai chi's not just working with the physical symptoms of a disease, it's working on the physical, the emotional and the mental/spiritual components of it,” Mr. Crosley said. “It takes people like Chris and all the others in the organization to help facilitate it and get it off the ground and running. It's a very large task.”



Despite starting out as a skeptic, Mr. Hitchens saw the benefits of tai chi for his own wellness, and

thanks to the VA, Three Treasures can now provide the same healing for others.

He said, “We’re trying to get the word out to serve as many people as we can, as many veterans as we can.”

Tyler Dague: rdague@post-gazette.com, 412-263-1569 and on Twitter@rtdague.

First Published February 7, 2021, 12:00am