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Japanese Martial Arts for Wellbeing During COVID-19

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The unprecedented and uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic have changed our lifestyles significantly, with lockdowns and social distancing measures in place to reduce virus transmission. These changes have likely had a negative effect on our wellbeing, and have been associated with increased stress, anxiety, and depression. During these unforeseen times, online martial arts lessons have highlighted the possibilities that martial arts offer in regard to positive wellbeing benefits such as self-awareness and self-mastery in managing and dealing with health issues. This short paper examines the potential benefits martial arts training may provide as an alternative wellbeing strategy to counter challenges associated with COVID-19.

Keywords: wellbeing; health; Japanese martial arts; self-awareness; self-mastery

Concerning wellbeing in the world impacted by COVID-19

The global pandemic of COVID-19 changed our lifestyles drastically (e.g., lockdown, social distancing, quarantine), damaging our wellbeing (Al Dhaheri et al., 2021). Moreover, the general fear of being infected with this virus increased people's stress levels as well as worries about unstable employment and access to health services (Bhandari et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, the levels of life satisfaction in Europe decreased by 17%, an equivalent impact to being diagnosed with depression (Eurofound, 2020). Anxiety and depression are now more prevalent than before: about 20% of people today experience anxiety and depression (Rajkumar, 2020; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020). Evidence identified several high-risk populations for mental health symptoms including women (Liu et al., 2020), those who have poor sleep quality (Liu et al., 2020), healthcare workers (Kotera et al., 2021), those with pre-COVID diagnosis

(Barber et al., 2020) and migrants (Bhandari et al., 2021). These findings indicate that COVID-19 negatively impacted the mental health of diverse populations.

Furthermore, despite the magnitude of the mental health problems, effective treatment has not been established (Soklaridis et al., 2020). Indeed, in some countries the rates of mental health problems have reduced in the past months (e.g., Widnall et al., 2020), however these changes can be explained by external events including the administration of the vaccines. For example, in the United Kingdom, the level of anxiety has reduced both in the general population (62% in March 2020 to 42% in February 2021) and in those with a pre-existing mental health diagnosis (67% in June 2020 to 58% in February 2021) (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). These positive changes could have been influenced by the administration of the vaccine, initiated in December 2020 (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2020), leaving the core problem of the COVID mental health difficulties unaddressed (The Lancet Psychiatry, 2021). In fact, more people feel that they are not coping with the stress associated with the pandemic: 73% believed they were coping in April 2020 but 64% did so in February 2021 (Mental Health Foundation, 2021).

Additionally, mental health challenges after the pandemic are expected (Mayne, 2020). These findings illustrate that establishing an effective and practical strategy to cope with the COVID mental health difficulties is essential today.

Martial arts as wellbeing practice

Martial arts training has become an integral part of sports and physical activity culture (Ko & Yang, 2008) and is associated with improved physical, physiological and social-psychological wellbeing (Cox, 1993; Szabolet et al., 2019). Traditional martial

arts refer to a range of physical and mental practices developed from ancient combat techniques (Yukawa, 2014), often used by the military (Cihounkova & Kordik, 2015).

In present times martial arts have evolved for self-regulation and the training of combat skills to help foster self-esteem, assertiveness and determination (Kostorz et al., 2017). These factors including discipline and perseverance contribute to the physical and psychological benefits to those who practice martial arts, and research suggests that training results in increased positive affect and decreased negative affect after training (Richman & Rehberg, 1986; Szaboles et al., 2019). While martial arts training schools and training practices may vary widely (Sandford & Gill, 2019), usually training involves small groups and could incorporate body movement, breathing and visualisation techniques. These training techniques and modes provide accessible, enriching, safe and secure learning environments for a diverse range of individuals (Fuller, 2019).

Traditional and modern martial arts styles of training lead to improvements in general mental health (Egan, 1992). Moreover, Lakes and Hoyt's (2004) showed an improvement in self-care and increased self-awareness, and a higher level of self-regulation. Similarly, Kostorz, Gniezinka, and Nawrocka (2017) noted self-regulation skills and combat training supported practitioner's self-esteem. Other studies showed enhanced psychological well-being in younger participants (Kuramoto, 2006) and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Wang et al., 2014; Sharma & Haider, 2015).

Martial arts practices use many traits and the cultivation of calmness and breathing control to promote relaxation during training, this helps individuals train and improves stress (Deadman, 2018). Also, breath control is taught as a concept of executing power and utilising energy (Janis et al., 1983). Janis et al. (2083) affirm that breath control is achieved by slowing down the respiratory frequency and increasing

depth which can reduce the feeling of anxiety and increase practitioner's threshold of tolerance to pain.

Furthermore, training in martial arts enables practitioners to learn the symptoms associated with stress, recognise these bodily responses and initiate controlled breathing exercises to reduce stress (Siddle, 1995; Deadman, 2019).

Japanese martial arts for wellbeing

Japanese martial arts philosophy includes customs, etiquettes, norms and rules (Fuller, 2019) with moral codes based on ethics and values with an emphasis on respect, self-regulation and health promotion (Fuller, 1988). Japanese martial arts are not only considered a sport but also fighting methods, which are developed based on historical combat techniques, using body movement to effectively defeat an opponent with bare hands (Yukawa, 2014). These techniques include physical and mental practices to acquire knowledge of embodiment, mind-body unity, and physical and mental health (Miyata et al., 2020).

Japanese martial arts nurtures awareness to one's breath and body through practice, as with Zen and mindfulness. Practising martial arts with a focus on the internal and external environment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) has comparable psychological effects to mindfulness training, leading to better mental wellbeing (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Miyata et al., 2020; Segal et al., 2002). Additionally, martial arts practice has preventative effects from mental health problems (Moore et al., 2019). Practitioners are less prone to depression in comparison to other sports practitioners/players (McGowan & Jordan, 1988).

Japanese martial arts practice helps self-mastery, associated with increased resilience and self-efficacy in managing and dealing with issues connected to health and wellbeing (Fuller, 2019). Self-mastery is empowering and deploys a degree of ownership in promoting health and wellbeing and reduces anxiety, stress and promotes mental wellbeing (Fuller, 2019).

Also, Japanese martial arts improve self-regulation and self-esteem (Kostorz et al., 2017). Practising martial arts also provides a community of like-minded individuals and offers a source of companionship, friendship and support for people in their everyday lives, countering isolation, a detrimental mental health construct in COVID-19 (Fuller, 2019; Kotera et al., 2020).

Recommendations for wellbeing in COVID

Japanese martial arts are a great resource for physical and mental wellbeing, enhancing physical health and reducing mental health problems (Fuller, 2019), and highly recommendable in COVID-19. During the pandemic, all martial arts dojos were closed which resulted in online lessons at home via virtual digital platforms like Zoom. This lone practising enabled practitioners to focus on their own physical and mental health through a variety of exercises such as breathing and mindfulness (Moore et al., 2019). The learning gained in this practice helped to reflect on moral codes, ethics and values, which facilitate practitioners to pursue their personal quest (Fuller, 2019). Many practitioners including the authors feel that lone practice of Japanese martial arts helps them focus on self-regulation and self-care, which are vital in coping with wellbeing

difficulties during COVID-19 (Kotera, 2021). Practising Japanese martial arts can be an effective wellbeing strategy for many people today.

Indeed, the limitations of this article include that empirical evidence to support the effects of Japanese martial arts for wellbeing during the pandemic remains to be offered. Moreover, positive biases towards Japanese martial arts might be present among the authors. These suggest rigorous research needs to be implemented. For example, an intervention study to assess the impact of practising Japanese martial arts on wellbeing with a control group would be a feasible option in the current situation, which could yield timely yet meaningful findings. Such attempts need to be made to appraise the wellbeing effects of this practice.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's lives drastically in a short period of time, leading to increased health problems. Previously reported health benefits of Japanese martial arts are highly relevant to today's COVID-19 health difficulties, indicating that this practice can be a strong protective means to the public health problems in today's world. Although more empirical studies are needed, this short article suggests Japanese martial arts as a wellbeing strategy during COVID-19.

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