

Ai Chi as an Integrative Practice

Mental and Physical Health: Ai Chi's Essential Role

Patricia Henry-Schneider MS, LPC

In Western medicine there has been a growing interest in the role of the mind as it applies to physical healing; at the same time there is a growing recognition in psychotherapy of the role of the body as it applies to psychological healing. Since I am interested in both physical and mental health and am a Licensed Professional Counselor who is certified in EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), and in Ai Chi, I have come to see myself in an integrative role. The word “confluence” comes from the Latin “confluere” “to flow together.” This applies literally to the junction of rivers and figuratively to “an act or process of merging.” That’s how I experience the integration of various health practices, in this case Ai Chi and psychotherapy (specifically EMDR).

In an attempt to convey my overall perspective of health, I want to share a broader view that embraces Ai Chi as a way of experiencing the mind/body connection while gently moving the human organism toward health in a flowing and supportive environment. My growing understanding of how Ai Chi fits into a larger theoretical overview of human development has taken place over a number of years in a way that I could never have anticipated. That is what I have come to recognize as synchronicity—in other words “meaningful coincidence” (co-incidents).

Without going into a lot of detail here, my professional development has included training and certification in EMDR, training and certification in Ai Chi, and studying interpersonal neurobiology, a theoretical system developed by Daniel Siegel MD. This gave me a way of understanding how Ai Chi and psychotherapy (including EMDR) reinforce each other for the overall healing of the individual and how this individual healing can “ripple out” toward improving our relationships and beyond. I’m not saying that one has to experience both. However when one does, there is more complete movement toward balance and integration, essential qualities of both physical and mental health.

Now add in the knowledge brought to us by Masaru Emoto’s “Messages from Water.” This shows us how we can affect the molecular structure of water by the kind of messages we send to it. While doing Ai Chi, we are sending positive messages to the water both within our bodies and all around us. Thus we are changing ourselves for the better both physically and mentally. If we are so inclined, we are also becoming more spiritually aware and developing a sense of how it all fits together.

I recognize that Ai Chi has influenced the way that I experience life every day. If we think of the meaning of the name (“love” and “life energy”), how could it not? When we look at the process and the practice within the interpersonal neurobiological framework, it is clear that every aspect of Ai Chi is promoting the **FACES** (flexible, adaptable, coherent, energized, and stable) trajectory that represents mental health. It also promotes integration of the mind/body system in all nine areas that Siegel describes as essential to mental health. These include integration in terms of **consciousness**, in **vertical** and **horizontal** dimensions, in the arena of **memory** and **narrative** integration, in **states of mind**, and in **temporal** and **interpersonal** dimensions. These will be described in more detail in my workshop. I will note here, however, that the final level of

integration is what Siegel calls **transpirational integration**. To quote him, “This dimension of integration felt like it breathed life across all the other domains. . . this sense of ‘across-breathing.’” In the practice of Ai Chi, the basic building block is the breath, and this deep belly breathing throughout the process helps to balance mind and body, thoughts and feelings, the hemispheres of the brain, and the branches of the nervous system. We are all deeply breathing together.

As the process becomes more and more familiar and involves less thought, we experience an opening up of space in our being, creating room for connection to self and others and encouraging creativity, calm, compassion, clarity, and ultimately coherence. Not only are we healing ourselves at a cellular level, we are smoothing out our actions and reactions. As we learn to handle stress, we can slow down the aging process and boost our immune system. Evidence shows that stress actually breaks down our cells at the level of our DNA. So burnout or falling apart or other ways that our language reflects the effects of stress is actually literal as well as figurative. As we practice stress management in a way that incorporates both our minds and bodies, we can avoid or repair the effects of stress. We metaphorically are following the advice we hear every time we fly on an airplane: “Put on your oxygen mask first before you help others around you.” Once we can breathe, then we can help others more effectively. For the skeptics that say “Impossible,” we can substitute “I’m possible.” And even though most of us are not going to be fully working in both the physical and the psychological realms, our awareness of how these two arenas intersect and support each other can give us a broader view of the whole picture. When we facilitate integration on all levels within ourselves and within our clients, we are opening up new possibilities in ways we may not even be able to imagine. Instead of feeling like we are “nowhere,” we are experiencing being “now here.” Ai Chi promotes mindfulness. And in Daniel Siegel’s words, “From this mindful place, there may be a path toward healing our global community one mind, one relationship, one moment at a time.”

Both Jun Konno and Ruth Sova emphasize that however Ai Chi turns out in the present is how it is supposed to be. In other words, each one of our clients is adapting the process according to her or his individual needs. As we choose how we teach the process, we can adapt what we say to meet the needs of the population with whom we are working. For example, what we say to pregnant women will differ from what we say to soldiers returning from war with posttraumatic stress disorder. Most of us probably teach a class consisting of people with a variety of issues. Thus I have developed a generic script, which each person can adapt to fit the issues with which he or she is working. Also I have adapted how I do some of the movements to fit in with what my experience has been of the natural flow of the process. When I teach, I point out the differences between my adaptation and the original form. Thus there is choice in how one does the movements combined with an awareness of how they were first developed. There is also choice in how many repetitions one does on each side, with the force or lack of force in how one moves one’s body, with the intention one sets for oneself, and so forth. As I emphasize to my class, each person is working through her or his own individual issues but doing so in a group setting. Even though it is an individual process, we are all supporting each other energetically, thus creating and providing a healing environment.

Ai Chi has changed the way I experience life and how I think of healing in a broader perspective. I have gotten a lot of positive feedback from participants about the

guided meditation aspect of the way I teach. This helps people to experience the process in a more holistic way. If one is teaching a workshop instead of a class or utilizing Ai Chi as part of a group therapy experience, there are additional multimodal experiences that one can add to the process. At an EMDR psychotherapy workshop I attended in 2005, Janina Fisher PhD emphasized the integrative potential of combining the spoken word, an accompanying visual stimulus, and awareness of body sensations, physical movement, and repetition of new experience. All of these factors are part of the Ai Chi experience and can be reinforced in a variety of ways. For instance, when I utilized Ai Chi as part of group therapy for individuals with psychiatric diagnoses, I brought in the element of art therapy. I asked participants to reflect upon their experience of Ai Chi and to collage that experience. Some people focused on certain movements; others focused on the inner obstacles they had to work through to even consider going to the pool; others expressed their overall feelings in relationship to the particular issues they were working on in individual therapy. Overall, the collage experience added more visual stimulation as well as promoting more reflection on how Ai Chi can be a part of “rounding out” their life experiences. I will share these collages during the workshop.

We are all part of the eternal flow of life. I want to build upon what others have offered and encourage more reflection and introspection within and between other Ai Chi instructors and students. As each one of us does our part, we join together in advancing that transpirational integration. We offer HOPE: knowing that Healing Opportunities Presently Exist and Honoring Our Perfect Essence.