

Tapping Technology to Bring Tai Chi to Older Adults: *Older people adapt to keep moving*

By Jennifer Davis, June 2020



Decades of research show that exercise is key to healthy aging. Many older people take part in exercise programs to help them stay strong and independent. As centers that deliver these programs have been forced to shut down to stop the spread of Covid-19, coaches are turning to technology to keep seniors moving.

As co-chair of the New Hampshire Falls Risk Reduction Task Force, physical therapist Dawna Pidgeon is a leader in falls prevention work. She works at the [Dartmouth Centers for Healthy Aging](#) and is trained in delivering the [Tai Ji Quan: Moving for Better Balance®](#) (TJQMBB) program, which research shows helps older people maintain balance and reduces falls by 58%. With the growing Covid-19 pandemic and advice for all to stay at home, Dawna and program delivery sites made a quick pivot to bring TJQMBB online as part of New Hampshire's community-based initiatives to reduce falls. And contrary to the myth that older people are not tech savvy, many individuals are embracing online programs to maintain their wellness routines. David and Renee are prime examples.

David and Renee's Story

David and Renee are retired journalists. Exercise was built into their lifestyle. They enjoyed traveling and David was an avid skier. Tai Chi fits how they want to live their lives and is now part of what they like to do. They have participated in the TJQMBB program led by Dawna for more than six years.

"Traveling and walking was always part of our lives," says Renee. "We never saw exercise as exercise – something we have to do. We just thought let's go and enjoy ourselves and that was part of the way we lived. Maybe in that sense we are luckier than many people."

With time, Renee and David have had to slow down. David developed idiopathic neuropathy and phlebitis, which led them to Dawna. As David's physical therapist she recommended TJQMBB, and he decided to give it a try. Although at the time Renee had no trouble with balance, she decided to join David to find out what tai chi was all about.

"I went with him to see what my poor husband would have to go through," says Renee. "Also, if only David went, then we would start to find excuses as to why he should not go because we want to do this or that. We treat TJQMBB with Dawna like a doctor's appointment."

Renee is convinced that "without Tai Chi David would not be vertical. We can't prove it, but we wouldn't want to even try testing by going without the program. It has been good for us. David hasn't fallen."

“Tai chi gives you a framework for working on the use of your muscles, the use of your legs, and your limbs,” says David. “And being trained in this ability provides a framework for going on and preventing deterioration with age, keeping your strength at least at a barebones minimum.”

When the Covid-19 lock down meant they could no longer attend their tai chi class in person they were up for continuing online. And they’ve discovered benefits with attending class using the Zoom application.

“Doing tai chi online is a major weekly event that provides structure,” says David. “Doing the class on Zoom, Dawna is more clearly defined. I can focus on her alone and get a more immediate and intimate picture of what she is doing. You can see right in front of your eyes the way things should be done, and you can wave to get the opportunity to let her know how you feel and ask questions.”

Renee agrees, “As David said, there is a certain immediacy with the virtual training, we get the impression of one-on-one support. That’s a plus.”

Online Tai Chi is Better than No Tai Chi

Renee and David both agree that there are pros and cons associated with attending class online.

“There is little bit of something that we lose with Zoom, which is the three-dimensional aspect of seeing the exercises in person,” says Renee. “Dawna must have realized this because recently she realized the only way she could explain a move was to turn around and show herself from the side so we could see how the rest of her body was affected.

Also, there is a spontaneous reaction when you are together. Someone asks a question and it clicks in your brain - yeah but I think this, and you might think of a follow-up question. It’s like being a journalist and as you gather information you may see an angle that has not been touched upon. With Zoom, we have to stop everybody and raise our hand if we have a question. Frankly speaking each time this happens the class gets choppy.”

And then there is the social aspect of getting together in person with others. “I’m finding out that there are two aspects to doing tai chi – one is the group and the social gathering, and the other is the exercise per se,” says Renee. “For us human friendship is not playing a big role right now.”

Despite the challenges to online tai chi, David and Renee appreciate that they are able to continue with the program while quarantined as we all ride out the pandemic.

“We are blessed with tai chi,” Renee says. “I haven’t met an instructor who doesn’t start class with a big smile both in person and online. Even if they are having problems themselves, they are very supportive, and bring joy to the group. It makes a difference, and this is an aspect that I think is important.”

“Even though Zoom is not perfect, it is still a godsend,” says Renee. “And I think it’s wonderful that we were given this chance to continue to exercise. Even though it’s not the same as in person, we still get something and something that is not bad. If it’s between Zoom and no tai chi – I’d definitely choose Zoom. And in winter I might even prefer Zoom.”

Moving Tai Ji Quan: Moving for Better Balance® online is made possible in part by a grant from [Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation](#), which has been flexible during the Covid-19 lock down, allowing funds it

provides to shift to alternative programs that promote healthy aging. These funds are administered through Elder Services of the Merrimack Valley and North Shore's Healthy Living Center of Excellence.