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Community for Los Altos and Los Altos Hills

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photos by Joe Hu/Town Crier

Natalia Gabrea Tejada leads a class in qi gong healing techniques.

Whether you are one of the many people heeding doctors' advice to increase daily exercise or merely a weekend walker, you may eventually discover that sports injuries are not exclusive to hard-core athletes.

Any wound is defined as a "sports injury" if it involves the muscular-skeletal system, which includes the muscles, bones and surrounding tissues, according to information published by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The most common are sprains and strains, shin splints, Achilles tendon injuries, compartment syndrome and knee problems.

Because of its structural complexity and weight-bearing responsibilities, the knee is the joint most commonly afflicted, spurring more than 5.5 million people to visit orthopedic surgeons each year. While the majority of sports injuries do not necessitate surgery, rehabilitation is always needed to repair and restore a body part to its normal function. Alternative therapies are available in the Los Altos community - gentle therapies designed to strengthen the body while soothing the spirit.

Natalia Gabrea Tejada, who runs Hiruko in Los Altos' Loyola Corners shopping district, offers the ancient Chinese practice of a simplified tai chi and qigong class. She said the exercises improve health and wellness, promote balance and coordination, reduce stress and increase knee and back strength.

“What we find a lot here in our classes is hips, knees and shoulders - and back problems - that’s chronic for all of us,” Gabrea Tejada said.

According to Gabrea Tejada, studies conducted by the National Council on Aging and the American Association of Retired Persons espouse the benefits of tai chi and qigong.

Qigong “stimulates and balances the flow of qi, or vital life energy, along the acupuncture meridians (energy pathways),” wrote the Burton Goldberg Group, which compiled the information found in “Alternative Medicine” (Future Medicine Publishing, 1999). “Like acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine, the qigong tradition emphasizes the importance of teaching the patient how to remain well.”

“It’s based on gentle movement and deep breathing,” Gabrea Tejada said. “I saw this as something that I really wanted to provide for the community. I know from my research that this is very helpful.”

When Marilyn Anderson began participating in the tai chi and tae kwon do classes two years ago, her only previous form of exercise was walking, and she was having difficulties with balance.

“I didn’t know I was as stiff and had lost a lot of physical flexibility,” Anderson said of her first classes.

Anderson said she noticed an increased level of energy, “right from the beginning. And tai chi has helped with breathing and stress reduction.”

Virginia Wick also noticed a reduction in stress when she started classes in February and recommends the classes to friends.

“You just generally feel better overall,” Wick said. “It just helps you be at your peak.”

Another local entrepreneur offers an equally gentle alternative to physical therapy.

Pilates studio owner Vera Szepesi opened Esprit de Core in Los Altos two months ago and said that 80 percent of her rehabilitation clients are there for post-rehab back injuries.

“Just moving - and learning to know that they can move without pain, by their state of mind - that’s beneficial,” Szepesi said.

Many doctors refer their patients to the studio, and many insurance plans cover the therapy sessions, Szepesi said. Instructors will modify the exercise programs for individual injuries and offer one-on-one attention to clients to ensure they don’t add insult to injury.

Szepesi bemoaned the drug commercials that encourage people to pop a pill in order to exercise.

“To mask the pain - you’ll just re-injure yourself,” Szepesi said. “You’re doing yourself a disservice.”

A newsletter from the NIH offers similar advice.

“Whether an injury is acute or chronic, there is never a good reason to try to ‘work through’ the pain of an injury,” the Handout on Health reports. “When you have pain from a particular movement or activity, STOP! Continuing the activity only causes further harm.”

Szepesi said many of her clients combine several alternative therapies for their injuries, including

chiropractics, acupuncture and energy-stimulating treatments.

For Anderson, who can now touch her knees to her nose, exercise at Hiruko will remain a life-long commitment.

“It’s perfect for me - for teens, adults - we all hang together,” she said.

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