



Martial Arts & Mental Health Benefits

By: Sr. Zenab Awan

Many people hear the words martial arts and immediately think karate chopping blocks or angry mixed martial art fighters with pulsing muscles and tattoos. What a lot of people don't realize is that many martial art practitioners enjoy martial arts not because of the physical aspect of it, but also because of the mental benefits it brings to one's mind and soul.

As someone who has been practicing martial arts for the last four years, I have met many people from all walks of life who were seeking therapy in the hopes of overcoming personal obstacles in their life. Child, youth and adult depression, post traumatic stress disorder, low self esteem, post partum depression, anxiety and panic disorders, to name a few, are

common among young, middle aged and old Canadians. Without resorting to drugs and medications to overcome mental health disorders, martial arts can offer comfort and relief to those suffering from common illnesses.

As a science, the martial arts have varying disciplines that offer varying benefits. By taking out the physical aspects of training and endurance, finding your "inner strength" through focus, breathing, and meditation allows a person to push past their internal struggles.

Here are some common Mental Health Benefits of Martial Arts:

Reducing Stress and Aggression

Grappling arts such as Brazilian Jiu Jitsu forces a person into uncom-

fortable positions. By using breathing techniques, the grappler is able to relax and find a way out of stressful situations. With regular training, Jiu Jitsu practitioners are able to overcome tense situations at home or at work with the same breathing techniques used in their training. Grappling arts are beneficial to both children and adults who suffer from trauma and need an outlet for their aggression.

Focus

Children who suffer from attention disorders and have trouble focusing are able to use martial arts training to help them focus their actions while tuning out distractions. While cases of attention in relation to children are unique to the individual, some martial arts can teach a child to set boundaries by redirect-

ing their energy. Setting goals helps children to complete one task at a time by focusing on the problem at hand. In addition, martial arts help develop cognitive skills by thinking and using memory in drilling and sparring.

Mental Clarity

Exercise and physical fitness have often been linked with positive effects on mental stability. The “feel good” neurotransmitters and endorphins have been proven to boost mental clarity, lower fatigue and leave a person feeling like they can conquer the world. In addition to that, combative martial arts help many people face their fears head on and transform them into something positive, leaving you feeling good about your accomplishments. Having control over an opponent can directly relate to being in control of your life.

Confidence

Many parents enroll their kids into martial arts to increase their confidence. However, it's not always children who need a boost. Adults who suffer from low self-esteem and need a confidence booster can reap many benefits of martial arts too. While martial arts training may look daunting and difficult, being part of a team, gaining new skills that you never knew you had, and making new friends who are there to support you on days that you are feeling down and don't feel like training can have a very positive impact on your relationships and mindset. By training in the martial arts, you come to realize that you can overcome any challenge that comes your way. You are put into stressful situations and pushing yourself beyond your limit to perform your absolute best.

Humility & Respect

Getting beat by someone better than you is a great way to tone down that bit of arrogance we all have. Martial arts that focus on technique rather than strength not only humbles a person, but also forces you to respect your opponent. Translating this aspect into daily life can keep people grounded and have a sense of respect for everyone around them. It also forces a person to work towards bettering themselves by setting goals and putting the time into becoming a better version of themselves every day. Some martial arts are built around patience, calmness, and insight. It helps people realize that everyone is unique, everyone has physical and mental struggles and everyone has distinctive abilities. It helps you understand what your limits are and how you can use them to your advantage in a stressful situation, and to appreciate what you have and what you can work towards.

While all martial arts have differing benefits to a person's

mind and physical fitness, allowing your body to heal from emotional and mental stressors through physical activity in the martial arts can bring great change to your daily routine. Many martial artists see it as a life style, not just an activity, as it embodies a system of moral values that can affect the physical and mental control the mind has on the body. It is not just about getting stronger and being physically fit; it is about self-control, assertiveness, and being in control of your composure in your daily life. If you are thinking about taking up a martial art to improve your mental health, do some research, and find out which martial art is better for you and your needs.

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