HOLISTIC RECONDITIONING FOR THE ELDERLY: EMBRACING INTEGRATIVE APPROACHES

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Abstract
The global aging population presents economic, social, and cultural challenges, accentuated by the rise of age-related chronic conditions. Physical activity emerges as a crucial component for elderly well-being, countering sedentary lifestyles and comorbidities. Motivation, habit formation, and cultural integration are key to sustaining exercise behavior. Practices like yoga, tai chi, and qigong, deeply rooted in tradition, offer holistic benefits for the elderly. Research underscores their positive impact on physical and mental health, particularly in improving balance and reducing falls. However, awareness of their advantages needs amplification. To foster adoption and sustainability, targeted awareness campaigns, community programs, healthcare integration, intergenerational involvement, and accessibility enhancements are proposed. By combining these strategies, therapeutic exercises can be seamlessly integrated into elderly lifestyles, promoting long-term health and well-being.

Keywords: ageing; chronic disease; exercise motivation; habits; yoga; Tai chi; Qigong; patient education.

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Key Messages for Research and Practice

• Encouraging culturally resonant exercises such as yoga, tai chi, and qigong among the elderly can significantly improve their physical and mental well-being, enhancing life quality and independence.

• Integrating therapeutic exercises into daily routines for the elderly through targeted programs and healthcare support can foster lasting habits, reducing sedentary lifestyles and improving overall health outcomes.
The global population is aging rapidly, making the well-being of the elderly a pressing priority. This demographic shift, driven by increased life expectancy and declining fertility rates, presents significant economic, social, and cultural implications [1]. With more people living longer with age-related chronic conditions, there is a growing need for specialized care, support systems, and age-friendly environments [2]. Aging is accompanied by a systemic state of chronic low-grade inflammation known as inflammaging [3,4]. Physical activity, a core component of rehabilitation, is beneficial for cardiorespiratory, musculoskeletal, cognitive, and mental well-being [5,6]. Exercise has also been shown to promote an anti-inflammatory phenotype in various tissues [7]. By prioritizing the needs of older adults, societies can better prepare for this demographic transition and enable dignified, fulfilling lives for the elderly.

With the increasing prevalence of sedentary lifestyles and comorbidities in the aging population, emphasizing physical activity becomes paramount. Moreover, as individuals age, engaging in strenuous activities may become challenging. Despite the numerous benefits of physical activity, one in four adults fail to meet the World Health Organization’s recommendations for physical activity [8]. Physical activity is seldom desired, but rather perceived as an obligation. Teixeira et al. found that motivation arising from autonomous self-regulation plays a crucial role in sustaining exercise behaviour [9]. Transforming a decision into a habit is crucial for sustained action. Habit loops are formed in the brain through associative learning and repetition, involving three key components: the cue (trigger), the routine (habitual behaviour), and the reward (positive reinforcement). When a cue is repeatedly paired with a rewarding routine, neural pathways involving the basal ganglia (pattern recognition), prefrontal cortex (decision-making), and reward system (dopamine) create an automatic, efficient loop. With consistency, habits become subconscious routines triggered by specific cues. Disrupting any part of this cue-routine-reward loop can break old habits or form new ones through new neural associations [10].

Cultural practices can be ingrained as sustainable habits by starting exposure early in life, integrating them into routines and rituals, linking them to existing habits, leveraging social support networks, connecting them to one’s cultural identity, ensuring accessibility, adapting them to modern lifestyles while preserving core elements, using reminders and celebrating milestones. Addressing potential barriers is also crucial. The key is making these practices feel intuitive, rewarding, and effectively woven into contemporary lifestyles for multi-generational sustainability. Encouraging alternative forms of exercise that have been practiced for centuries and align with cultural and spiritual beliefs can motivate adherence to physical activity. Yoga has its roots in the Indian culture for over 5000 years. It involves techniques that harmonize the body, mind and soul [11]. Similarly in Eastern Asia, Tai chi and Qigong are exercises that date back to thousands of years. Like Yoga, they are multidimensional and incorporate mindfulness, flexibility and structural alignment [12,13].

There is a growing body of evidence on yoga, demonstrating its benefits across various dimensions of life - physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional. Its actions are mediated via suppression of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and the sympathetic nervous system [14]. In addition to flexibility, yoga also increases muscle strength, cardiopulmonary endurance, and improves posture and balance. Fear of falling is one of the most disabling challenges faced by the elderly, often resulting in a loss of confidence, often associated with high morbidity and mortality. A meta-analysis on the effects of yoga in people with Parkinson’s disease have shown beneficial effects on balance function, motor function, and emotional disturbances [15,16]. Another meta-analysis of 12 studies (11 Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) and 1 pilot study) comprising of elderly people over 60 years old showed a moderately positive effect of yoga on balance, muscle strength, mobility, and lower body flexibility, but not on cardiorespiratory endurance [17]. Similar results were observed in an integrative review of six RCTs, which showed improvement in psychological health, including fear of falling, in addition to physical health [18]. An open-label, randomized controlled trial (YOFEAR trial) assessing the effect of yoga therapy in elderly patients (≥60 years) with fear of falling using standardized scales is being carried out in a tertiary hospital in Northern India, with results awaited [19]. Tai chi also improves balance and reduces falls in the elderly population [20–22]. Similarly, studies evaluating the benefits of Qigong in elderly patients have reported favorable results [23–26].

The aforementioned exercises can be considered more therapeutic than traditional exercises due to their holistic nature. Owing to their cultural resonance, these exercises are likely to have higher acceptability within the elderly population. As they do not require expensive equipment, they are easily accessible. In recent years, there has been a great focus on these alternative exercises. However, more awareness needs to be created regarding their benefits and additional advantages.
To increase adoption and sustain the practice of therapeutic, culturally-resonant exercises like yoga, tai chi, and qigong among the elderly population, a multi-pronged approach could involve: launching targeted awareness and education campaigns; offering inclusive community programs led by trained instructors; integrating these exercises into the healthcare system as complementary therapies; engaging younger generations to reinforce cultural significance and promote continuity; ensuring accessibility through convenient locations, accommodations, and adaptations; and implementing incentives, rewards, and public recognition for consistent participation. By combining awareness, community support, healthcare integration, intergenerational involvement, accessibility measures, and positive reinforcement, the adoption and sustainability of these therapeutic exercises can be enhanced within the elderly population.

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