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REVIEW: COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

Effects of Baduanjin on mental health: A comprehensive review



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Summary Mental disorders affect not only individual well-being but also community health, which pushes mental care professionals to investigate various solutions to accommodate different needs. The exercise of Baduanjin, a form of Qigong, facilitates improvements in psychological health, potentially serving as an alternative choice for interventions. This comprehensive review analyses 28 publications, among which three are in English and 25 in Chinese, these indicating enhancement in quality of life and mental health for a variety of participants, including college students, middle-aged individuals, the elderly, and patients who suffer from different mental problems or chronic physical illnesses. The outcomes suggest that this cost-effective, learner-friendly and self-pacing exercise should be promoted in individual and group settings for both curative and preventive measures, and for which further investigations are also recommended.

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Introduction

Research reports that more than 450 million people around the world are affected by different levels and various types of mental disorders (Funk et al., 2010), implying a need for a substantial, well-trained mental health workforce. In

contrast to this need, however, the mental care workforce has less than six nurses per hundred thousand people worldwide, and less than one psychiatrist per two hundred thousand people in half of the world's countries (World Health Organisation, 2014). This shortage is particularly severe in low and middle income countries (Scheffler et al., 2011), resulting in the continual devastation of their health service systems. Moreover, the adverse effects of drugs, and the minimal responses to antipsychotic medication diminish medicinal functionality for some patients with mental illnesses (World Health Organisation, 2014).

In response to these unfavourable situations, mental health professionals pay attention both to improving

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treatments, and to preventing mental disorders (World Health Organization & Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2014) by means of creative measures, such as innovative deinstitutionalisation (World Health Organization & the Gulbenkian Global Mental Health Platform, 2014) and complementary and alternative therapies (Elkins et al., 2005; Fritze, 2006; Tan et al., 2010), of which Baduanjin, a form of Qigong (Zhen et al., 2014), is one of the available choices.

Qigong includes a broad range of traditional Chinese health care exercises such as Baduanjin, Tuna, Waidangong, and Xianggong. This “mind-in-body” (Kerr, 2002, p. 419) technique evolved many centuries ago and aims at regulating breathing, heart and body (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2014)), resulting in an enhancement of physical and mental health. Baduanjin, also called Eight-Brocade Exercise, Eight Section Brocades or Eight-Treasured Exercises (Koh, 1982), developed from the *I-Ching* philosophy (Koh, 1982) regarding a balance between *yin* and *yang*. Its origin is impossible to trace but a similar exercise is documented in Chinese literature written in the Wei and Jin Dynasties (220 A.D. – 289 A.D.) (Zhou, 2011). A consensus of legend suggests that General Yue Fei (岳飛) promoted Baduanjin in his army in the 12th century (Zhou, 2011), thus making it a conventional physical activity for health training.

Baduanjin consists of sitting and standing forms (Zhou, 2011), and the newest version of the latter (Su and Ru, 2002) was stipulated by General Administration of Sport of China “General Administration of Sport of China (2013), which has accelerated its popularity for community-based health promotion. It has been standardised as a set of eight movements (Chinese Health Qigong Association, 2014) for limbs, body-trunk and eye movements, including “holding the hands high with palms up to regulate the internal organs”, “posing as an archer shooting both left-and-right-handed”, “holding one arm aloft to regulate the functions of the spleen and stomach”, “looking backwards to prevent sickness and strain”, “swinging the head lowering the body to relieve stress”, “moving the hands down the back and legs and touching the feet to strengthen the kidneys”, “thrusting the fists and making the eyes glare to enhance strength”, and “raising and lowering the heels to cure diseases” respectively. This set aims not only to strengthen musculo-skeletal fitness (Koh, 1982) and circulation together with a *qi* breathing training, but also to regulate emotions, representing body-mind effectiveness.

Practising Baduanjin results in physiological benefits (Jing et al., 2013; Mei et al., 2012) for automatic nerves (Wu and Hu, 2013), osteoarthritis (An et al., 2013, 2008), strokes (Zheng et al., 2014) and bone loss prevention (Chen et al., 2006), is therefore recommended for the elderly (Wang, 2007). Studies also report enhancements in psychological health through practising this exercise (Liao, 2009; Wang, 2013; Wu, 2012), such as improvements in suboptimal health (Geng and Wang, 2008; Jiang et al., 2010) and emotional regulation for detention centre officers (He et al., 2009), proposing the amelioration of mental health (Han, 2013). One review investigated the physical effects of Baduanjin (Mei et al., 2012), but no reviews have analysed its effectiveness on psychological functionality. The current comprehensive review looks into the effects of

Baduanjin on the mental health of healthy people and patients with chronic illnesses, involving a wide spectrum of age groups.

Research method

Data sourcing

The present study researches English and Chinese publications on the effectiveness of Baduanjin on mental health, involving 54 online databases.

English sources

Searches were performed through 52 major databases in ProQuest, including the British Nursing Index, ERIC, MEDLINE, PILOTS, PsycARTICLES, and PsycINFO. The “peer reviewed” and “scholarly journals” boxes were checked in order to retrieve academic works. Inputting the keyword “baduanjin” and restricting the search to “document title”, nine pieces were listed, whereas nine pieces were also listed when restricting it to “identifier”.

Chinese sources

The Taiwan Electronics Periodical Services (TEPS) was used to search for Taiwanese works. However, the search list came back nil when entering the keyword “八段錦” (Baduanjin). The China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) was also adopted, from which 77 journal papers published in mainland China were listed when using the keywords “八段錦” and “心理” (psycho*).

Eligibility criteria

This review requires the inclusion of the following: first, literature published before July 2014, including Online First publications; second, empirical studies; third, full texts; and lastly, mental health relevant topics. However, it excludes case reports, letters, book reviews, literature reviews, editorials, commentaries, dissertations and conference proceedings.

Selection Process

The literature search acquired 95 literature items ($n = 18$ in English, $n = 77$ in Chinese) (refer to Fig. 1), among which duplicated works and those that fell into the exclusion criteria were ruled out. The second step was to remove those which did not meet the inclusion criteria, which resulted in a final 28 publications ($n = 3$ in English, $n = 25$ in Chinese) selected for further review.

Results and discussion

The 28 studies reviewed (refer to Table 1) involve 2959 participants, and were mainly conducted in mainland China ($n = 26$), 20 of which were published from 2010 to June 2014. Although they examined a variety of themes, 11 of them looked into the effects of Baduanjin on general mental health, seven on physical and psychological health, and five on quality of life; concerning college students

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