

TAI CHI FOR HEALTH

Meditation in MOTION



Movements with names referring to nature, such as “Waving Hands in the Clouds” and “Push the Mountain” ... Music that evokes feelings of calmness and clarity ... Repetition that builds inner strength, trains balance, and promotes mindfulness of movement and surroundings ... Welcome to Tai Chi for Health offered by Blair Senior Services, Inc.! Tai Chi for Health is an evidence-based program developed by Dr. Paul Lam, who is a family physician, a Tai Chi practitioner and teacher of over 40 years, and a world leader in the field of Tai Chi for Health improvement. It’s one of the many programs offered by Blair Senior Services, Inc. to help individuals over the age of 60 improve their overall health and wellness and live a healthy lifestyle.

Amy Williamson and Scott Moyer are Blair Senior Services, Inc.’s Tai Chi instructors. They have been leading classes in Blair County for almost two years now. The classes are designed for beginners to learn the moves and gain health benefits safely and relatively quickly. “That’s the great thing about this program,” Amy explained. “When Dr. Lam first turned to Tai Chi to help manage his severe arthritis, it took him three years to learn the complex, high-risk moves, and to start to see any health benefits. He realized this was too long, so he worked with a team of medical professionals and Tai Chi experts to develop a program with movements that are easier to learn, safer, and more effective for health.”

Although Tai Chi originated in ancient China as a martial art with many complex moves, it isn’t your “typical” martial art. “Tai Chi for Health is not like karate,” Scott noted. “We don’t break boards and we definitely don’t throw anyone over our shoulders! There’s absolutely no physical contact, and we never get down on the floor, either.” It’s a

mind-body exercise that integrates slow, flowing movements with breathing and cognitive skills. “Because of this,” noted Amy, “Tai Chi is sometimes called ‘meditation in motion.’” Most people practice Tai Chi today for its health and relaxation benefits. “It encourages us to slow down, focus inward, and re-connect and re-balance our body and our mind.”

Unlike most other exercises, where pushing harder and going faster is the goal, Tai Chi moves look deceptively slow and gentle. “But don’t underestimate them,” said Scott, “the movements improve muscle strength from within, which gives better support for the entire body.” This form of exercise has been gaining popularity in the United States for many years now. “Tai Chi for Health is practiced worldwide by over 5 million people each day,” noted Amy. One aspect that makes it so popular is that it is a gentle exercise, so anyone can try Tai Chi. “Almost anyone of any fitness level can practice and gain the benefits of Tai Chi in a relatively short period of time,” Scott said. “In fact, you can even be seated and realize the health benefits of the program.”

Over 500 medical studies by organizations such as Stanford University and Harvard Medical School have proven the many health benefits of Tai Chi, and more than 30 of those studies were based specifically on the Tai Chi for Health program offered through

Blair Senior Services, Inc. “This program is also supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as well as arthritis foundations worldwide,” shared Scott. Studies have shown that Tai Chi enhances flexibility, gently frees up stiff joints and helps to relieve pain, which can improve the ability to do daily tasks.

“We also focus on upright body alignment while we’re practicing Tai Chi,” Amy explained. “Good posture, among many other health benefits, is shown by studies to make you feel more positive and boost confidence, and when you feel positive and confident, it increases

your chance of success in whatever the task by 20%!” One of Tai Chi’s greatest potential benefits is improving your balance, which can aid in fall prevention. “Over 1 in 3 individuals over age 65 fall each year, so practicing Tai Chi is a great way to potentially prevent this from happening.”

Tai Chi for Health classes begin with a series of warm-up exercises that work from the neck down to the ankles, gently stretching and loosening up the joints, and helping to calm and focus the mind. “These warm-ups are really necessary to loosen up our body and to quiet our mind before we begin practicing,” Scott said. Participants are encouraged to always stay within their comfort zone and modify the moves to suit their individual range of motion.

**Tai Chi
Classes
Offered**

- Beginner
- Advanced
- Continuing Your Journey

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Tai Chi can be practiced at any time of the day that works for you. Many participants enjoy starting their day with Tai Chi, others use it to help unwind at the end of the day. “Some have said they do the warm-ups at night as a bedtime routine to help them relax and prepare for rest,” shared Amy. “It’s wonderful to hear that participants are integrating Tai Chi into their wellness routine!”

Participants really enjoy this relaxing and slow-moving form of exercise. “Some have remarked before class, ‘I really need this today,’ as they share what’s going on in their life at that moment,” Amy said. Tai Chi helps to relieve stress, leads to a feeling of peacefulness, and in general, is just an enjoyable practice. There’s a real sense of camaraderie in the classes. “Each group gets along so well. Before the classes start, they’re catching up with each other and asking how their week was. It’s a really good feeling to be part of such a great group,” Scott remarked. Amy agreed, sharing, “We kind of become a Tai Chi family. Every group that we’ve taught has been like this. It’s been wonderful.”

Scott and Amy started out instructing Beginner and Advanced classes and have created a third level due to participant interest. Focusing on the principles of Tai Chi, “the ‘Continuing Your Journey’ class has gone over very well,” Amy said. “Scott and I enjoy researching and preparing for the class, and helping the participants deepen their practice of Tai Chi.” They also incorporate some of the cultural background of Tai Chi into the “Continuing Your Journey” class. “To add to the experience, we try to include pieces of Chinese culture. Scott went on a trip to China a few years ago, so he’ll bring in items such as artwork or coins to talk about. We try to keep things interesting and fresh for the participants,” explained Amy. “At our current ‘Journey’ class at the Bellwood-Antis Public Library, the librarian will bring in books on Tai Chi, China, and related topics for us to peruse before or after class. That’s been a really nice bonus.” Scott and Amy also try to incorporate some of the language into the classes as well. “At the beginning of class, we ask everyone to walk around and greet



Amy Williamson and Scott Moyer instruct a Tai Chi class held at the Southern Blair Senior Center in East Freedom.

each other, saying ‘Ni hao,’ or ‘hello’ in Chinese,” Scott shared. “It’s a great way to start the class. It gets everyone smiling!”

At the end of each class, Amy reads an uplifting positive thought or quote for the day. “One of my favorite sayings right now is, ‘One Day... or Day One!’ It’s your choice! Just reversing the order of those two little words can change your life in a positive way. If you’ve been putting off trying Tai Chi and saying, ‘One day I’ll start...’ decide to make today Day One of your Tai Chi journey!” suggested Amy. Scott and Amy encourage anyone to try Tai Chi, and for those who have already taken a course, they welcome you to come back and learn more. “People can take these classes as many times as they want,” Amy shared. “We have participants who are on their fourth round of classes and are gleaning details they hadn’t noticed before, or are focusing more on integrating the principles of Tai Chi. There are so many layers to Tai Chi that the more you practice, the more depth you can add.”

Every two years, instructors must get re-certified in the Tai Chi for Health program. So, as the instructors continue to grow in their knowledge and understanding of Tai Chi, the program at Blair

Senior Services, Inc. will continue to grow as well. “We’ve had such an interest in expanding and learning more about Tai Chi from many of the participants,” shared Angel Dandrea, Volunteer Program Supervisor. “It’s a really exciting time for those who are considering joining Tai Chi or those who are already on their journey.”

Tai Chi for Health at Blair Senior Services, Inc. is free for adults 60 years of age or older and their caregivers (with the participant). Amy and Scott are also teaching other evidence-based classes, including fall prevention workshops, and “Living a Healthier Life with Chronic Conditions.” “All of these programs can have such a positive impact on each participant’s health and well-

being,” Amy said. “It’s so rewarding to be a part of it.” 🌟

Disclaimer: Information contained in this article was taken from the publishing and teachings of Dr. Paul Lam.

For more information on Tai Chi for Health or other evidence-based classes, please contact Blair Senior Services, Inc. at (814) 946-1235 or toll-free at (800) 245-3282, or visit blairsenior.org and Blair Senior Services, Inc. Facebook page for a schedule of classes.

Potential Health Benefits of Tai Chi

- Improved muscle strength and flexibility
- Pain relief and less stiffness
- Improved balance, aiding in fall prevention
- Stress relief and uplifting of spirit
- Improved ability to do daily tasks