

LIVING

The slow shifts of tai chi can help build a better body

Are you leaving the house later because it takes forever to find your cellphone, car keys and that wayward umbrella? About dinner-time, and again on awakening, start breathing like a yogi. It turns out that one of their simplest techniques — left-nostril breathing — improves spatial memory. That's the kind that helps you remember where you put something.

Try it: Hold your right nostril shut and breathe deeply and slowly through your left.

In one study, practicing this for a month slowed sympathetic nervous system activity and increased heart rate variability, both indicating less stress. The connection: Hormones churned out when you're tense mess with your ability to recall where you left your shopping list or if you unplugged the coffeemaker.

In another study, undergraduates who did left-nostril breathing before a memory test scored 16 per cent higher than those who didn't. And left-nostril breathing improved spatial memory scores in kids by 43 per cent. But (and here's the fascinating part) right-nostril breathing had no effect.

The explanation? Breathing



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through your left nostril may give your left hippocampus, the area that controls memory, more blood flow and thus make it better able to gain and retain memories.

Could right-nostril breathing give your right brain a jolt and make you better at creative tasks? Proving that might be on some right-brain researcher's to-do list.

SLOW, BUT SOOTHING

You've probably seen people doing tai chi. TV crews love filming people gathering at dawn to wrestle demons in the air — all right, that's not what they're really doing. Tai chi is rightly called moving meditation; its gentle positions relax your body and centre your mind. In just the past few months, dozens of U.S. studies have found

that tai chi helps with:

- Heart attacks: tai chi speeds recovery.
- Breast cancer: it helps you get your strength back.
- Sore backs: tai chi is as good as acupuncture and yoga at easing them.
- Weak, painful legs messed up rheumatoid arthritis or nerve damage (often from diabetes): tai chi makes them stronger.
- Maddening menopause symptoms: tai chi helps shut them down.
- Arthritic knees: tai chi relieves these, too.

In case you're wondering if the anything tai chi alone can't make better, there is: depression. High energy, aerobic exercise is better that.

Also, the research is still iffy on whether it helps prevent falls that fracture hips.

On the other hand, as we've said before, tai chi is a candidate for natural Ambien: People who do an hour of it three times a week fall asleep faster and sleep almost an hour longer.

The YOU Docs, Mehmet Oz and Mike Roizen, are authors of *YOU: On a Diet*.

A man practices tai chi in Toronto on a misty Monday.



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