

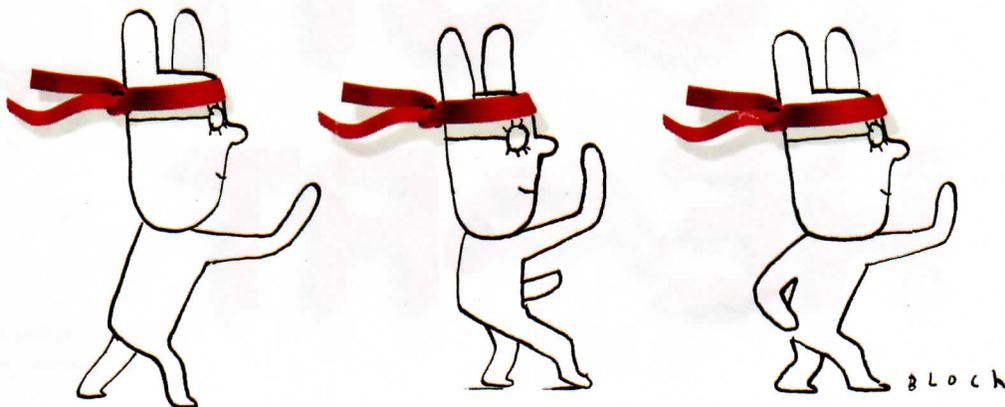
Trying on Tai Chi

Finally! Our columnist finds a relaxation technique that will work for anyone ... except herself. BY JENNIFER DRAWBRIDGE

LOVE EVERYTHING about tai chi. Except doing it. On paper, we're a perfect match: This martial art has centuries of de-stress cred—you can do it anywhere, and it doesn't require special equipment. Research shows that it may help with everything from alleviating stress to decreasing falls in the elderly to reducing arthritis pain.

Effective, inclusive, and beautiful. If tai chi were on Facebook, I'd double-Like it. I am still persuaded that you should absolutely give it a try. But I got off on the wrong foot with tai chi, literally and figuratively.

In order to learn the art and reap its stress-relief benefits, you must start at the beginning. Unfortunately, because of the scarcity of classes in my small town, I had to sign up for one that was already under way. The instructors tried gently to point out the drawbacks of this plan, but I insisted. (Another point in tai chi's favor: uniformly kind instructors.)



Over the course of an hour, I realized a number of things. First, tai chi is hard. Not bench pressing 200 pounds hard, but more like defusing bombs hard. Tai chi choreography, known as “forms,” consists of a series of small, specific movements that, when done correctly, flow seamlessly. The precise

Now You Try It

To find a beginner's class in your area, visit worldtaichiday.org. Most classes meet once or twice a week, but **daily practice for 10 to 20 minutes is recommended.**

adjustments necessary to do it correctly require focus and repetition. Second, as kind as the instructor was, it became clear that I am not a natural. Tai chi movements have fairy-tale names such as “white crane spreads wings” and “parting the horse's mane.” Sadly, even after an hour of practice, I was doing something more along the lines of “passing Aunt Margaret the hot casserole without pot holder.”

And then there was the hitting. I knew that tai chi is a martial art, but I'd decided that the martial part was merely a footnote. When my teacher urged me to think about raising my arm as if I were warding off a blow, I

just couldn't see the connection between stress reduction and fending off an imaginary enemy intent on smacking me. “Defense is a central theme to tai chi. It helps you relearn how to move your body and stay in a place of tranquil, peaceful meditation, even when under stress. With practice, you see a shift from struggle to joy, and that's where the healing element comes in,” says Ian Gamble, founder of Full Circle Synergy studio in Portland, Maine.

I believe him. Time, access to classes, and a mild case of post-traumatic tai chi syndrome mean it's not for me right now. But I plan, someday, to try again.

Jennifer Drawbridge is a Maine-based midwife and science writer who's a bit tightly wound, which is why her nephew christened her “The Stress Bunny.”