

# Lessons Learned from Teaching Older Adults

by Johanna Hattendorf

Over the past 8 years I've had the joy and privilege of teaching Tai Chi and Self-Defense to Older Adults—both at our local Council on Aging, and in my own studio. I've had a lot of fun, and laughter, and learned so much from my older adult students. Whether it is practicing Chen Style Tai Chi form, or lessons in being assertive; learning to say no, or to ask for what we want, we have shared in this journey together. Much about teaching older Adults is the same as teaching younger students, but there are some important differences:

- 1. Think Function:** Older adults are motivated to stay independent as long as possible—up and about, driving, traveling, enjoying friends and family. Aging bodies start to lose flexibility and function, so, every class needs to address the question: Does this class help students to stay functional?
- 2. Address the Fear of Falling:** The Center for Disease Control has published some sobering statistics: 1 in 3 people age 65+ will fall each year. *Among older adults 65 and older, falls are the leading cause of injury death.* They are also the most common cause of nonfatal injuries and hospital admissions for trauma.\* Fear of falling can cause older adults to alter their gait, their movements, and their posture as they take smaller steps, look to the ground, and seek to stay stable. A fundamental concept of self-defense is to address our fears, therefore, I've learned that in classes of older adults, I must



- include some aspect of re-training to address the fear of falling.
- 3. Train for Body Awareness:** As we age, our bodies change. Many medical reasons can lead to a decrease in body awareness and lack of sensation—neuropathy in the feet, diabetes, stroke, arthritis, as well as a decline in proprioception—to name just a few. These all add up to a lack of awareness of where the body is and what it is doing. Warm-ups or drills that teach students to pay attention to their bodies help bring heightened body awareness.
- 4. Focus on Ability:** When I began to teach older adults at my local Senior Center, I had no idea what they would be able to do or to learn or to retain. They showed me! After 8 years, I can easily make a promise to students in my classes: “If you come to class, you will get it and you will be able to do it.” I try not to limit myself as an instructor, or my students, by thinking in terms of their lack of ability. Instead, I focus on their ability. What CAN they do?
- 5. Modify and Adapt:** To go along with the above: If there is a movement or stance that is challenging, or not possible, *ask what is possible.* If arthritis in the hand means they can't bring their fingers together, what else have they got that they can use? If limited balance means they can't bring a leg up, can they hold onto someone's shoulders, or use a hand strike. Focus on what works, and be willing to adapt and modify. It's helpful to remember the goal—more function, and better balance! (see #1 and #2)
- 6. Laugh!** I put this one in the center of the list, because I want it to be in the center of all my classes.

\* CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Unintentional Injury Prevention, 2012, Falls among older adults: An overview. [www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationsafety/falls/adultsfall.html](http://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationsafety/falls/adultsfall.html); retrieved July, 2013.

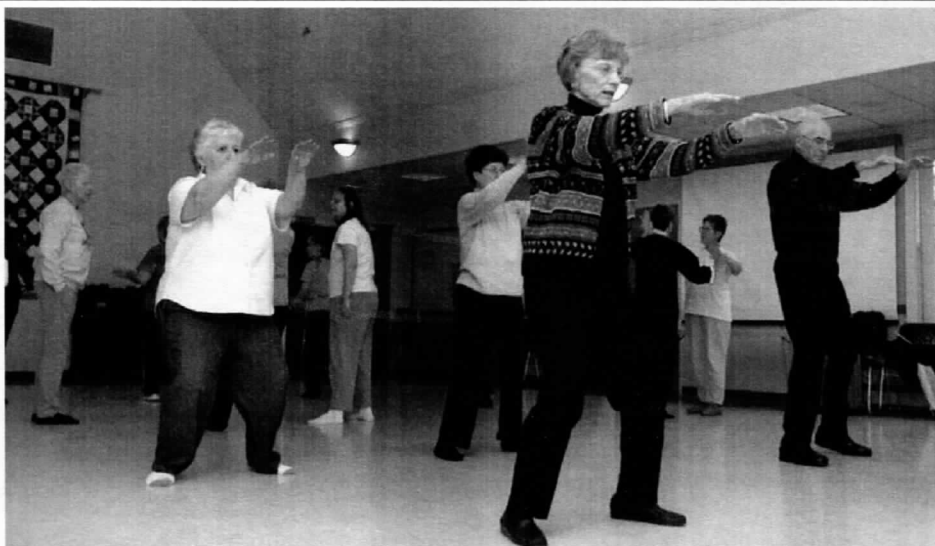
Laughter brings all kinds of feel-good chemicals to the brain and the body, lightening our load, lifting our spirits, energizing our bodies, and relieving pain. Even if the movements are challenging or the topic is serious, we can still laugh. Students look forward to class—and I do too. Because we are having fun.

**7. Sitting/Standing:** I'll admit it took me a long time to learn this lesson. But, my students taught me that movements done standing can also be done sitting. Practicing hand strikes sitting down gives students a bit of a rest. And teaching footwork sitting down allows practicing without the fear of falling (see #2).

**8. Repeat, Repeat, Repeat:** Older adults can do a lot, and the brain can learn new things up until the day we die. But, as we age, we may need more time to learn, process, remember. Breaking down movements, teaching it in little pieces, then practicing it over and over again helps to develop confidence and mastery. My own rule of thumb—when I think they've got it, I repeat at least 3 more times, then 3 more times. Then I ask them if they want to repeat it again. (they almost always do).

**9. Cue more, with fewer words:** Older adults may need more time to process information, plus low vision or limited hearing can lead to misunderstanding or inability to understand a particular instruction. That doesn't mean to talk louder. It does mean to articulate clearly and use fewer words. Although I want students to be able to do the movements on their own, I realize that the cue needs to be embedded in memory just as much as the movement. So, I make sure to cue, cue, cue until students really have a sense of mastery.

**10. Celebrate Victories:** When students get it, I'm thrilled. And I show it. I clap, I dance, I cheer. I sing. They laugh, I laugh. We share the victory of learning something new.



Teaching older adults is a great joy. It is an honor to share their journey. If you haven't reached out to teach a class with older adults, I hope you will give it a try.

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