

Getting a soulful workout

Nia technique combines martial arts, dance and healing arts

Invented to add emotions, spirituality to regular workouts

GREG BONNELL
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An exercise discipline that rejects the credo of higher, faster, stronger in favour of having fun, setting your own pace and losing yourself in the moment was just what Sandy Feldstein was looking for after developing fibromyalgia.

The self-confessed former jock had to redirect her life after suffering chronic, widespread pain in her muscles, ligaments and tendons accompanied by fatigue. Nia provided the movement she was seeking.

"I knew it was something that I needed to be doing and that I could do without feeling worse than I did when the class began," says the certified kinesiologist and Nia instructor.

Combining martial arts, dance, and the healing arts, Nia — short for neuro-muscular integrative action — is described as a soulful workout.

"Basically it's new age aerobics, no shoes, bare feet," says Jill Batura of the faculty of physical health at the University of Toronto.

"It's about getting in the moment, feeling fully present in the now, enjoying the movement and then taking that sensation outside of the class," she says. "So it becomes a lifestyle practice."

Nia blends nine movements into one routine.

From the martial arts it draws upon tai chi, tae kwon do and aikido for strength and mindfulness. Jazz, modern dance and the free-spirited Duncan dance are used to encourage graceful movement. The healing arts of yoga, Feldenkrais and the Alexander technique act as nurturing body therapies.

"One moment you're doing something sharp and strong. The next moment it's graceful, fluid and flowing," says Batura. "Then you're moving the head in such a way and re-aligning the body that it's drawing upon the healing arts."

The different disciplines are fused together in such a way that students are often not aware of switching from, say, tae kwon do to modern dance. Since classes usually last about an hour, it's also a good cardio workout.

The method was developed in the 1980s by California couple Debbie and Carlos Rosas after attending expressive dance classes and realizing that regular gym workouts were lacking emotion and spirituality.

There are now weekly Nia classes across Canada, including 45 in British Columbia and 80 in Ontario, and some 1,000 instructors worldwide.

It's part of a larger trend of moving toward a more spiritual model of exercise, says Batura, as words like spiritual and sacred become commonplace in fitness class titles.

And students pursuing their bachelor's degree in physical health and education at the University of Toronto can actually get academic credit for taking Nia classes.

"Through movement we find health" is one of the many tag lines associated with the technique but one that resonates profoundly with Feldstein.

"The human body needs to be moving. No matter what our limitations are there's some way that we can move,"

she says. Because Nia can be tailored to any level of physical fitness, Feldstein teaches it to people recovering from osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia and various injuries.

"It is a very inviting way to bring movement back to the body. Not moving hurts more," says Feldstein, whose own battle with fibromyalgia meant that she had to relearn a lot of basic movement skills.

"In Nia, our sport is life," she says. "So we have to learn about lifting, lowering, twisting, bending. All the kinds of movements we have to do in a day."

And through the movements of Nia, students are made mindful of the here and now, rather than dwelling on the past or looking to the future.

"When we're other than here we don't heal as effectively and it's harder to reach our potential," says Batura. "When we're right in the now we reach our potential, we become more inspired. Basically we're more fully alive."

For more about Nia on the Web go to www.niac-on.ca or www.nia-nia.com.