

Martial Arts Benefits My Body, Mind, and Soul

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This time last year, I became a Kyo Sa Nim, a second-degree black belt in the Korean martial art Mu Sool Won. A first-degree black belt usually trains for two years and then tests for an additional two years to move up in rank. It took me six years.

I was one test and three months away from promotion when I stopped training in the fall of 2016. With my stressful work schedule, I had neither the time nor the energy to attend class. After my liver transplant in 2017, I resumed my martial arts practice to rebuild my strength and lose the weight I'd gained from taking prednisone.

I began Mu Sool Won in 2010, four years after my Crohn's diagnosis. I had never been good at sports and hadn't exercised regularly. My neighbor and Sunday school classmate, a Mu Sool Won instructor, encouraged me to join. I had wanted to learn self-defense, so I signed up for the four-week introductory program.

At first, I was nervous because physical activity sometimes exacerbates my Crohn's symptoms, especially when I have a flare. But I discovered martial arts was different. The standard one-hour class is divided into four parts: warmup, kicks and punches, techniques and falls, and forms. Advanced classes can last 80 to 90 minutes and include weapons training.



Emmeline, second left, receives her Mu Sool Won certificate, accompanied by her husband, Patrick, left, and her parents. (Courtesy of Emmeline Olson)

Warmup

Warmup is more than stretching our muscles. It incorporates aspects of yoga, such as poses, centering our chi, or energy, and focusing on breathing. We also do core-strengthening situps and wrist, fingertip, and knuckle pushups. For IBD patients, the warmup provides easy, low-impact exercise that eases joint pain and increases flexibility.

Kicks and punches

After warming up, we practice a series of kicks and punches, usually 10 on each side. Advanced students do jumping kicks, combination kicks, and punches. This cardio portion of the class increases our heart and breathing rates, and we work up a sweat. For IBD patients, the aerobic workout strengthens muscles and joints and releases stress-relieving endorphins.

Techniques and falls

Self-defense techniques are both physical and mental. We learn how to use joint locks and acupressure points to defend against an attacker. If we're the assailant, we learn how to fall. Each belt rank learns two or three sets of techniques and each set averages 10 to 15 techniques. The last time I counted, I know more than 350 techniques.

A study published in 2016 discovered that Crohn's patients suffer from subtle cognitive impairment, such as concentration and memory issues, caused by the inflammation, stress, and fatigue associated with the disease.

Mu Sool Won techniques require a lot of memorization and recall. During testing, the judge calls out the name of the set and the number of the technique in the set to be demonstrated. We have less than a minute to react, so remaining focused is key.

Forms

Two or three students practice techniques together, but we perform forms as a class. Each belt rank has its own form. Akin to shadowboxing, a form mimics fighting an opponent. The choreographed kicks, punches, and stances are a holistic workout. Forms require flexibility, provide aerobic exercise, and rely on the student to remember all of the motions while being attentive to avoid hurting other classmates.

For IBD patients who may suffer from bone loss caused by long-term steroid use, the weight-bearing movements in forms are beneficial. Almost two years after resuming practice, I've been increasing my bone density.

Benefits of regular exercise

For IBD patients who might undergo abdominal surgery, research shows that being in shape can speed up recuperation and healing. I didn't know it at the time, but the endurance and strength that I gained from martial arts facilitated my recovery. I had built up my core and the muscles in my arms and legs, and this enabled me to get out of bed and walk the day after my liver transplant.

In addition to the overall health benefits of a regular exercise routine, martial arts gives me a social outlet. As a Crohn's patient, I often want to be a homebody. As both a martial arts student and instructor, I interact with others, and I've made several friends over the years.

What I like most about my martial arts school is its inclusiveness. Several students have a physical limitation. We have students who have suffered from stroke, survived cancer, and of course, me with my chronic diseases.

Even age is not a hindrance. In the classes I attend, all the sixth-degree black belts are women older than 60 who can beat up men twice their size and half their age. What's important is we know our bodies and our limitations. We follow doctors' orders for what we can and should not do in class. After all, we exercise to improve our health, not to cause new or additional injuries.

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