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Chi Kung: Ancient Chinese health practice provides another option in the treatment of PTSD

by Craig Cormack

On a clear, sunny June day in the year 2000, Canadian Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire, former commander of the ill-fated 1993-94 UN mission in Rwanda, sat down on a park bench and tried to drink himself to death.

Seven years earlier, Dallaire and a few thousand ill-equipped UN peacekeepers had done what they could; but after a 100-day reign of terror, more than 800,000 Rwandan civilians were dead, most killed by their machete-wielding neighbours. Haunted by a genocide he could not stop, Dallaire was stricken with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Dallaire survived his attempted suicide, and wrote about his experiences in his award-winning book *Shake Hands with the Devil*. Now a Canadian senator, lecturer, and Honourary Chair of the PTSD Association of Canada (www.ptsdassociation.com), he is among the approximately 2.8 million Canadians living with PTSD. (According to Dr. Ruth Lanius, chair of the clinical advisory board to the PTSD Association of Canada, the lifetime prevalence rate of PTSD in Canada is approximately eight per cent.)

During the First World War, the military called PTSD *shell shock*, and routinely shot

deserters who suffered from it. Today, PTSD is a recognized psychiatric disorder. It occurs in victims of war, accidents, natural disasters, sexual or psychological abuse, or other traumatic events. Symptoms include stress, anxiety, panic attacks, flashbacks, nightmares, insomnia and depression. Victims suffer alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, broken families, homelessness and sometimes even attempt or commit suicide.

Some drug treatments for PTSD have proven useful; however, the side effects of medications can be mildly to severely debilitating.

Psychotherapeutic interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) offer patients coping and problem-solving skills. But as yet, there is no satisfactory cure for PTSD in sight.

The American and British militaries have invested millions in studies that measure the efficacy of alternative therapies for PTSD. These therapies include Chi Kung, an ancient Chinese health practice that stimulates the body's natural healing impulses. Chi Kung effectively treats stress, anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, depression, panic attacks, and other afflictions that accompany PTSD.

Chinese doctors prescribe Chi Kung to

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enhance their patients' immune systems, energy, stamina, focus and peace of mind. Patients learn simple breathing and concentration techniques, and perform meditative movements and stances that are quick and easy to learn, practice, and achieve rapid results with.

Among its many health benefits, Chi Kung balances cortisol in the adrenal glands to reduce stress. It controls blood sugar levels and increases blood flow to brain vessels. It also improves the effectiveness of medications and speeds up recovery from illness. And it effectively treats PTSD in combat veterans.

The US and Britain have invested in Chi Kung as a simple, inexpensive and easy to deliver PTSD therapy. Canada should also invest in Chi Kung as a proven and cost-effective therapy for its soldiers and civilians suffering with PTSD. ♣

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