

Functional Exercise

By Billy Greer

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Decades ago the only people making an effort to exercise were athletes preparing for competition; daily life involved so much physical activity that exercise was superfluous. People walked places, chopped wood, tilled soil, pumped water from wells, and, in general, got exercise doing the things that needed to be done.

In today's world, people ride their car to the corner grocery store; buy their food instead of growing it; and sit in front of computers or watch television. Their work and home life do not provide enough physical activity, so they must seek out an exercise program to provide the physical activity they need for good health. Unfortunately, that exercise program often becomes just one more thing to try to fit into an already busy schedule. In the past, exercise was provided by activities with a purpose; now, exercise is performed for the sake of exercise. You improve your fitness, but don't accomplish anything else.

The problem with many exercise regimens is they are designed to isolate parts of the body and train them independently. In fact, if you try to use your whole body, your trainer will admonish you for "cheating" - using bad form. In real life situations, you rarely use muscles independently of each other. In fact, doing so increases your chance of injury and adds wear and tear to the body.

The general principle of functional exercise involves moving the body the way it was designed to move. You engage the muscles in a natural sequence, which involves much more of the body and mimics movements you might encounter in everyday life.

It is also important the exercise accomplish something other than just improving fitness, while maximizing the efficient use of your time. Perhaps it would be fun to take up gardening where you will be lifting, digging, and walking or dancing where you'll improve your social life while getting lots of aerobic activity. Just as in the old days, exercise will almost be an incidental benefit of doing a useful or enjoyable activity.

Other interesting choices could be Kung Fu or Tai Chi, which epitomize the concept of functional exercise. They are "whole body" martial arts that are really about learning to use your body in a biomechanically correct way. They engage both sides of the brain, move every muscle and joint in the body, and teach you to coordinate your movements so every part of the body is working together.

Many people are surprised to know practices from thousands of years ago actually encompass modern buzzwords. Both Kung Fu and Tai Chi will help you develop core strength by

using plyometrics, develop functional strength, improve proprioception and improve kinesthesia. In addition, they tend to improve overall health, not just fitness.

It is important to understand that being fit does not automatically mean you are healthy. Some people can be unhealthy in the pursuit of their fitness, which can lead to problems later in life. The Chinese philosophy of exercise puts an emphasis on developing long life with a high quality. Fitness and health practices are combined to produce a system that people continue to practice well into old age.

Kung Fu and Tai Chi offer all the health benefits while accomplishing something useful - an effective system of self-defense. In Chinese philosophy, it all comes from the desire to preserve health. Your hard work improves or preserves your health and fitness and the skills you develop enable you to prevent someone from taking away your health or fitness.

In conclusion, whatever your motivation, you owe it to yourself to explore the many benefits of Chinese martial arts and to learn how functional exercise can do much more than just help you look better.

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