Tai Chi as a Mind-Body Intervention for Treating Social Isolation in Older Adults: A Narrative Review



Presenter:
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BACKGROUND

- Chronic pain affects 30% of older adults.
- 25% of older adults are considered socially isolated and self-describe as being lonely.
- Most chronic pain is considered primary (no identifiable structural basis), so pharmacotherapy is of limited value.
- Group exercise may promote social connectedness.
- More than 300 million individuals practice Tai Chi globally, including 1.5 million in the US, with classes widely available in community settings.

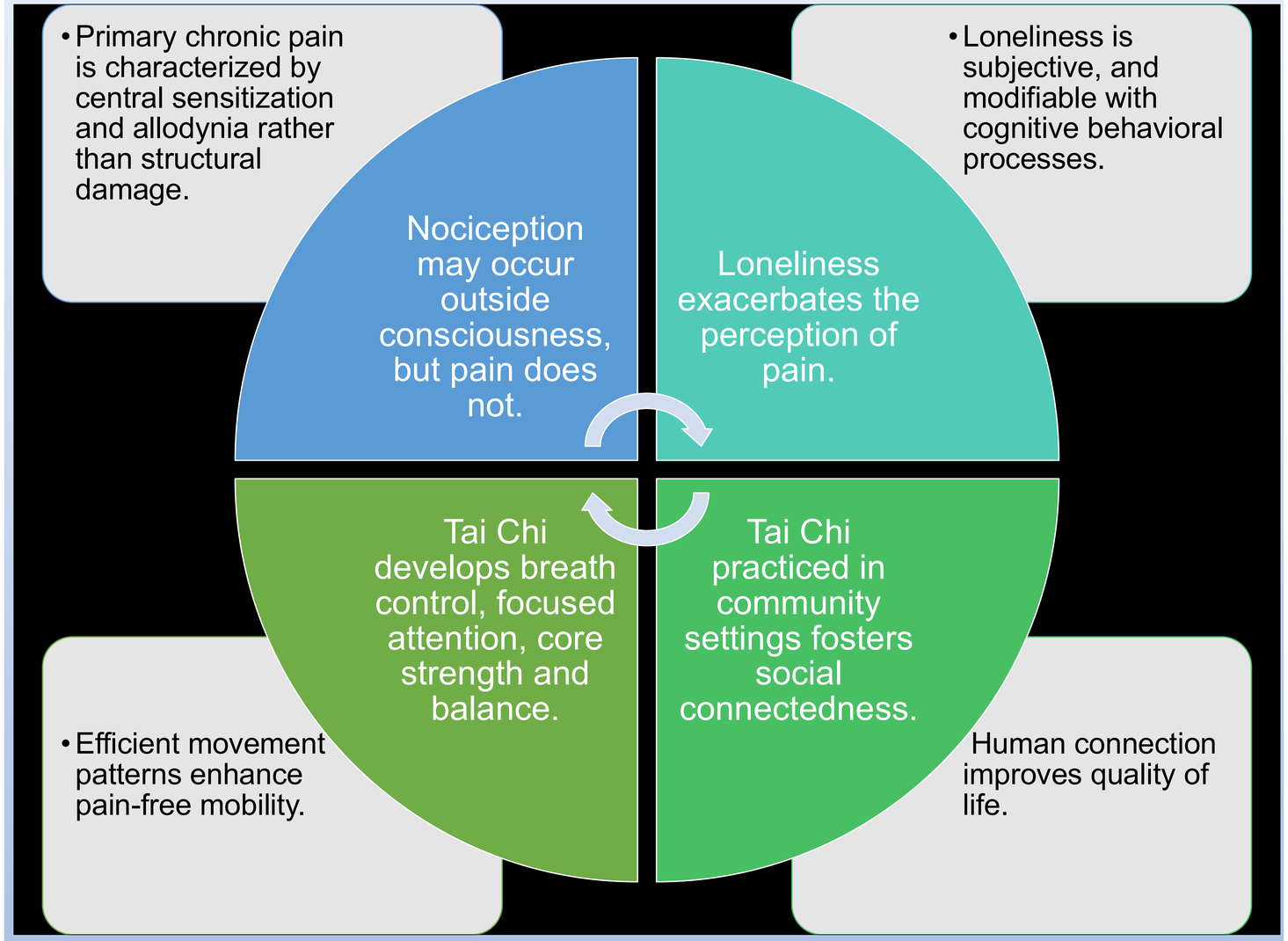
METHODS

- Narrative review of 25 peer-reviewed studies
- 1,098 results identified, 25 met inclusion criteria.
- Study size ranged from n = 18 to n = 21,463
- Study designs included:
  - n = 7 cross-sectional
  - n = 5 longitudinal/cohort
  - n = 3 qualitative
  - n = 1 mixed methods
  - n = 1 pilot
  - n = 1 non-randomized controlled trial
  - n = 5 systematic reviews/meta-analyses
  - n = 2 narrative reviews

RESULTS

1. Six studies reported improvements in pain-related outcomes, 5 reported improvements in social connectedness, and 3 reported improvements in both.
2. Limited evidence endorsed Tai Chi as a safe and effective method of managing chronic pain in this population.

The experience of pain occurs only in consciousness.



Chronic pain results from complex interactions between biological, psychological, and social factors, for which mind-body interventions are particularly relevant.

Why Tai Chi?

- Gentle rhythmic movement improves balance, postural alignment, and muscle tone.
- Tai Chi has been shown to improve insulin sensitivity, and reduce inflammatory biomarkers (*TNFα, CRP, & IL-6*) (Liu et al., 2025).
- Diaphragmatic breathing serves as a pump, modulating LV afterload hemodynamics and regulating autonomic tone (Salah et al., 2022).
- Weight-bearing exercise improves bone density, reducing the risk for osteopenia, osteoporosis, and fractures.
- Group exercise promotes social connectedness, reducing loneliness, rumination and feelings of helplessness.

CONCLUSIONS

- While results were mixed, most studies reviewed reported reduced subjective pain ratings and increased mobility, as well as increased opportunities for building social networks.
- Reductions in loneliness may reduce pain interference.
- In some populations perceived social support moderated the relationship between pain intensity and functional outcomes.
- Some studies reported broader health outcomes related to depression, sleep disturbance, and cognitive impairment.

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