

Tai Chi Movements for Wellbeing

Creating a Space for Healing

Betsan Corkhill



Betsan Corkhill - I am a Lifestyle-health and Wellbeing Coach specialising in working with people who live with long-term conditions, particularly ongoing pain. I have a clinical background in physiotherapy spending many years helping those with long-term medical issues.

I left physiotherapy in 2002 having become frustrated at the 'system' I found myself in. I was working in the community and was expected to treat people with multiple comorbidities of all ages in a few visits. Many had the capacity to improve significantly given time and ongoing guidance. I felt they should be offered the opportunity.

I am a passionate advocate for a whole-person approach to health, from managing day-to-day stress and life's inevitable challenges through to managing ill-health. My many years as a physiotherapist have enabled me to combine my clinical knowledge with coaching to help individuals navigate our fragmented health and social care services, as well as to improve their health and wellbeing.

My work as a Lifestyle-Health and Wellbeing coach has involved working with individuals, globally; running 'Wellbeing for People with Pain' programmes; wellbeing modules on subjects such as stress, sleep, movement, pain, social connectedness; speaking and writing commitments and being a Tai Chi Movements for Wellbeing trainer. I have also been researching the meditative, creative and social benefits of knitting and developing the concept of Therapeutic Knitting to improve wellbeing. I work with local charities to enable those attending my classes to come at significantly reduced cost.

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Following an invitation to speak at The Philosophy and Ethics Special Interest Group of the British Pain Society summer retreat in July 2022, I have been mulling over some thoughts about my practice and teaching of Tai Chi Movements for Wellbeing. I am particularly interested in the role it can play in improving the wellbeing of those living with complex health issues including persistent pain, ME/CFS and long covid.

Perhaps, rather surprisingly, my journey to this point began with my work into the therapeutic benefits of knitting. See my Knitting Equation right. I've been researching the meditative, creative and social benefits of knitting since 2005, and within this developing the idea of therapeutic knitting.

In my work with people living with long-term health problems, as a former physiotherapist and now as a Health and Wellbeing Coach, I've observed that those who struggle become somehow fractured/fragmented. Stories I've collected from knitters around the world tell of how the rhythmic bodily movements help calm the mind and are somehow 'unifying'. This combination of rhythmic bodily movement, thought and feeling seem to be important. I began to explore this more, and to look at body or bottom up approaches as a means of influencing the mind because

it's difficult to change the mind with the mind, particularly in a crisis. You can't instruct your mind to RELAX! or CALM DOWN! but you may be able to facilitate change through the body.

This led me to explore Tai Chi. Further motivation came from people attending my 'Wellbeing for People with Pain' courses. We'd have a session on movement and the feedback would invariably be - **"We know it's good to move but we don't know how or where to start. How much to do. How to keep motivated."** It was felt that physiotherapists tended to focus on the body part that was painful in quite a mechanical way over a limited time frame, whilst personal trainers, through exercise referral programmes and gyms, in general, didn't know about pain and started off too intensively and too fast, causing a crash with increased pain so the person

living with pain often didn't return. Of course, there are exceptions to this.

My exploration of Tai Chi soon became daunting as there are thousands of different moves and it takes tens of years to become a Tai Chi Master. Then in 2019 I came across the Tai Chi Movements for Wellbeing (TMW) organisation which is based in Herefordshire and founded by Tai Chi Master, Richard Farmer, with his wife Marigold.

I got a place on the TMW annual training programme in 2019 and now run regular classes. Most participants have pain, many have fibromyalgia, some live with functional neurological disorder, ME/CFS, mental health issues, and more recently, long covid. I also run classes for the Carers Association. Carers carry a huge number of life's loads, particularly over the last few

years having had little to no support during the pandemic, and their health is suffering as a result. Online classes work particularly well for those living with fatigue as they don't have to exert precious energy travelling to a venue.

The more I learn and teach TMW, the more I realise how deep the practice reaches and the depth of thought that went into choosing these particular moves out of thousands. Although the moves are simple, they hold great meaning, and as a mind/body approach it's complex.

A State of Healing

At about the same time as I was investigating Tai Chi and TMW, I came across the statement below from clinical psychologist and founder of the Optimum Health Clinic, Dr Alex Howard -

“You need to be in a state of healing in order to heal.”

It's one of those statements that seems so obvious when you see it, but I hadn't properly considered this before. It had a profound effect on my thinking. Suffering from long-term illness is stressful for many reasons and it's an even more stressful experience when it's 'medically unexplained' as in long-term pain, fibromyalgia, ME/CFS, long covid and functional neurological disorders. You're afraid because you don't know what's wrong, why it's wrong and whether you'll ever feel better, let alone recover. In addition, there are the societal pressures such as poverty, poor housing, trying to live life on benefits and the discrimination

“Tai Chi integrates body and mind. Body movements are coordinated with rhythmic, conscious breathing and multiple cognitive and emotional components, including focused attention, heightened self awareness, visualisation, imagery and intention.”

Dr Peter Wayne – Assistant Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School¹

that comes with it, to factor into the complex mix. Most, if not all those who seek our help are in a state of stress or distress and are often stuck in this 'ON' state even when they don't need to be. This is the opposite state to what is needed to heal and repair. We need a state of stress to survive. We also grow and adapt when under stress, but then those systems need to return to balance. It becomes a problem when that system gets stuck on 'ON'. These systems need to learn to slide appropriately again.

Bottom or body up approaches change input and I'm intrigued as to whether they are more effective than top down ones (such as CBT) in re-training our body's protective systems to behave more appropriately.

Bottom up approaches enable your bodily systems, the whole of you, to experience that feeling of 'being safe', 'balanced'. We learn and change from experience.

A person living with long covid commented after a sequence **“Wow. I felt an incredible sense of safety during that.”**

Another with fibromyalgia told me, **“I reached such a deep peaceful place within me. It felt wonderful and I now know I can find a place where I feel good.”**

When I came across Alex Howard's statement, I began asking if we were wasting our time using current methods of treatment in people who are stuck in a state of stress/distress?

Should our first step be to help people experience a state of healing?

That state where balance, homeostasis and a parasympathetic calming response is dominant - **a state where we are optimising the potential for healing.** And if this isn't possible because of their circumstances (the context of their health), enabling them to find 'moments of balance' throughout a day where they experience 'moments of calm and safety'. I suspect that any other treatment/medication we offer in addition will then work more effectively in this state.

I've also realised that it's not about 'trying hard' or 'pushing', or 'working hard' at recovery. **It's about making or creating a space that optimises the potential for healing and recovery.**

“Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water.

Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible, nothing can surpass it.

The soft overcomes the hard, the gentle overcomes the rigid.”

Lao Tzu²

More recently, I've been running TMW classes for people living with long covid. When we first met they talked about 'trying hard', 'working hard at recovery', so at first it was more about stopping them from pushing and trying hard to recover in order to get back to their previous lives. It's been more about slowing

them down to create that space where healing can happen. If you're trying hard, you're probably pushing yourself into a stressed state. One lady told me that she was now 'trying softly' and I like that idea. **TMW is movement with softness, safety, fluidity, rhythm, calm, relaxation and intention.** Modern life encourages us to be hard, to push hard, to be bigger, better. TMW teaches us that less is more.

When an illness is invisible or poorly understood there is a lot of pressure from society to get back to work, to get back to life. Individuals and groups within your immediate environment and on social media can be cruel, increasing the pressure to 'get out there and do it'. **We need to recognise as a society that we need to take the pressure off. Recovery needs us to create the right circumstances. It needs time, our respect, kindness, knowledge and support.**

"Give time, space and respect to convalescence if you can."

*Dr Gavin Francis, Recovery*³

Post Exertional Malaise

Before I go any further, I need to address the subject of Post Exertional Malaise (PEM) because the moment you mention any form of movement-based approach for long covid or ME/CFS it gets aggressively shouted down for being dangerous. And it is if it's done in a Graded Exercise Therapy (GET) format where the intensity is increased in a fixed way over time or if the person isn't listening to their body and responding to its needs in that moment. PEM is a very real

problem that can severely limit what some people can do, both physically and mentally. I find it sad that, because of the fallout and harm experienced as a result of GET, feelings are running so high on this subject that it's difficult to have a reasoned discussion about movement. All those attending my long covid classes are referred appropriately.

A lady with longstanding ME/CFS who suffered harm through a GET approach has been attending my classes for over a year. She practises TMW most days and says it is the only thing she's been able to do without crashing, and she is sticking at it. It's truly wonderful to watch her moving with fluidity and flow. Recently she also told me, **"I'm having moments where I feel healed."**

When asked what she meant by this she replied, **"Moments where I feel whole, at peace, safe, where I'm not running on super high, where I'm at peace with being me."**

As GP and author Dr Gavin Francis says in his book 'Recovery', **"It's about learning a new language of the body and listening to it with care."**

One lady with ME told me that TMW has shown her that she is constantly vigilant and **"I don't need to be, because I'm not in constant danger."** This constant vigilance was reflected in her tight, tense posture, ready to run or fight at any moment. TMW teaches people to listen in to their bodies and to do what feels right for them in that moment. Just because you did it yesterday, doesn't mean you'll be able to do it today or improve on that. I take care to emphasise that **having 'up and down days' is not only OK, it's**

'normal' because 'normal' life is up and down for everyone.

We also teach the concept of 'Soft Limit' which is life changing for many. This is explained in more detail later, but when TMW is practised within Soft Limit it doesn't trigger a crash. I think another explanation is that conventional exercise stresses the body so, when attempted from a position where your systems are already stuck in a stressed out state, it can cause more problems. TMW's gentle, rhythmic approach calms those systems through rhythmic movement and engendering a sense of safety. If energy levels are low then participants can visualise or watch and still benefit - it's soothing to simply watch. We teach that it's perfectly OK to do that and I encourage everyone to have a go at visualising from time to time for a different experience of the sequence. Similarly, practising the sequence sitting down isn't a regression of doing it in standing, it's simply a different way of experiencing the movements and good to explore.

The biggest problem we've encountered in long covid is recruitment. I've heard comments of **"Can't they see I'm ill?" "Is this all the NHS has to offer?" "I need proper treatment."** People are still stuck in the idea that the only 'real' treatment is medication and that the NHS needs to 'do something to me' or 'give me something'. These are very understandable feelings that we also come across in the world of long-term pain and they need to be addressed with understanding on a wider scale. This is what one person told me - **"I remember**

going along to the long covid clinic and hoping for answers and for some sort of magic pill. It's crazy really but I was so desperate and had felt so sick for so long, I came away feeling really disappointed. The doctor recommended TMW and I thought, what is this going to do for me? I was willing to try anything so agreed. It turns out that was a great decision on my part."

Recruitment is also a problem because of the fallout from the harm done by Graded Exercise Therapy (GET). This has become an anti all movement-based approach which is very prominent on social media, particularly on platforms such as Twitter. All of which is understandable, but we need to be able to have a reasoned discussion on the topic. We also need more clinical awareness of the benefits of an approach such as TMW and sufficient time to explain it during the clinical consultation. Most people seeking our help have multiple issues with their health and in their lives, and clinicians just don't have the time to explain 'Why Tai Chi?'

A young woman with longstanding fibromyalgia and now long covid who has been on a few pain management programmes over the years said "TMW is one of the most useful life skills I have ever learnt."

Principles and Understandings

TMW is a 12-move sequence taken from the practices of Chi Kung and Tai Chi, and whilst being simple it still retains all the benefits of these practices. It can be taught purely as a movement

class or to get the full value, as an introductory six-week course that also teaches principles and understandings which can be taken into the rest of your life. This is where you get the full value which can be a real catalyst for lasting change. Following this six-week course, participants can attend ongoing classes which build on and deepen their practice and understanding. The movements can be done standing, sitting, visualising or watching, if they're having a particularly challenging day, and we explain how to visualise effectively.

TMW is based on the recognition that the mind and body are intricately and intrinsically connected. An example, in simple terms, is if you are stressed it will be reflected in bodily tension, although the relationship is a lot more complex. TMW also recognises that bodily movement can affect the atmosphere of the mind. This becomes a circular, intertwined process of mind and body interacting and working together in a way that cannot be separated. To extend this thinking, we should always bear in mind that your environment – immediate local and wider world – provides the context for your

health and wellbeing. So it's about your **mind, body and environment interacting in a way that is inextricably connected.**

Further TMW understandings support the value of the mind and body being in the same place at the same time. We use the sequence to bring people into this state of being present in a gentle way; learning to connect and live life from the present moment, directly encouraging the mind/body as a unified 'whole' into a healing state. This can be challenging for many, particularly if they feel pain, but I'm convinced it is THE foundation of the change that then begins to happen.

Living in your body

The reality is that most people live in their heads most of the time. I certainly did before I encountered TMW. This is particularly the case if you have unpleasant or painful bodily experiences. It became evident immediately in the long covid classes that people were turning their backs on their symptoms in an attempt to get on with life. They didn't want to be 'in their bodies'. There was a general recognition that they'd been doing this, as well as a general feeling of putting their life on

"If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not 'washing the dishes to wash the dishes.' What's more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realising the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can't wash the dishes, the chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future — and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life."

Thich Nhat Hanh⁴

hold until 'I'm fixed'. This is what one lady said – **“I've realised my mind and body are disconnected, very far apart and I realise now that's how I've been coping.**

Turning my back on pain, blocking it out. Coming back into my body has made me aware of it again but I don't think turning my back on it will help in the longer term.”

Another said, **“TMW has made me realise I've been living outside my body in an attempt to escape the symptoms.”**

We talk about how being present in the body can help them make the most of each present moment. Philosopher Havi Carel talks about finding moments of wellness or wholeness within illness. We talk about finding safety, stability and feelings of wellness even within illness and adversity as a better option to putting life on hold. Nurturing a feeling of 'In this moment, I am safe'.

This approach of creating moments of wellness and safety also seems to work for people who carry a lot of life loads – for example, poor environment, poverty, living with or caring for family who have mental health issues. I see a number of women who are caring for partners or children who have serious mental health issues that cause constant ongoing stress. Covid, and problems in Social Care and mental health services, have increased their burdens.

I believe their pain is directly linked to unbearable life loads. This can be multi-generational. Some have elderly parents, partners, children and grandchildren with significant health problems. I would challenge

“Pain is social. Pain is almost always worsened in those hurt by society: the lonely, the marginalised and the voiceless.”

Dr Monty Lyman, *The Painful Truth*⁵

anyone not to have pain or other health problems in the same situation. This will only get worse with the cost-of-living, health and Social Care crisis we are currently facing. We don't achieve anything by filling them with drugs and medicalising these issues. In addition, there is a rising fear of long waiting times for NHS treatment so there is a real fear of how they will cope. The Covid pandemic has also raised the burden of fear for many who weren't previously unwell, and we are only just beginning to see the tip of the iceberg of the future health problems that will arise from this.

Learning to find moments of safety and wellness in each day enables them to put those loads down for that moment; to find balance, safety, stability and, hopefully, healing in those moments. It's not an answer to those life problems but it helps a bit and gives them a place of safety within themselves that no one can take away, regardless of what chaos is going on around.

“TMW is not something I do, it's a place I go to.”

TMW uses concepts such as a visualisation of having a 'Kangaroo Tail' to enable people to feel the safety and support of the ground beneath them. People are taught to take their attention to the base of their spine and visualise this extending down into the ground, as if they had a kangaroo tail. A kangaroo uses its

tail to maintain balance. People like this image and find that even when all is chaotic around them, their grounded 'Kangaroo Tail' will support them and keep them safe and stable. The idea of 'Kangaroo Tail' can also be visualised as anchoring them to bring their mind and body together in the same place at the same time. We learn to create a habit of settling into the 'Kangaroo Tail' by linking it to everyday activities such as boiling the kettle and cleaning teeth, and you can eventually learn to live your life from this grounded, present space. Participants have used it in many different circumstances including to help with sleep when the mind is elsewhere, and importantly to cope with situations outside their control such as being in crowds or social situations when anxiety starts to rise.

I'm aware that 'coming into your body' can be difficult for people who have been through a traumatic experience. Coming face to face with the real state of your health and life can be challenging but it can uncover some important realisations. One lady told me – **“I'm really not very well, am I? This is the first time I've realised this. I really have to start being kind to myself. I need to slow down, to give myself time to recover.”** This person regards this realisation as a positive one, and as a result took the decision to stop trying to push through and to give herself the time she needed to recover.

TMW brings people into a state of being present in the moment in a really gentle way through the grounded 'Kangaroo Tail' and the flow and rhythm of the simple moves. I say simple moves, but only 'simple' in terms of the actual moves. As a mind body approach TMW works in complex ways. The flowing rhythmic movements soothe the process of coming into that embodied state. 'Kangaroo Tail' takes them into an imaginary tail so those living with pain or past trauma find it easier. This has worked well in many scenarios.

“In order to get over a problem, it helps to look at it. You can't climb a mountain that you pretend isn't there.”

Matt Haig⁶

When a person begins to come back into their body they can experience an increase in symptoms. Those with long covid experienced this at first but then it eased off. I think this is because in this state of embodied presence, people are coming face to face with the real situation. This can be a shock. I think if you're constantly trying to ignore your symptoms they eventually tend to shout louder. It also takes up a lot of energy and is exhausting. In this state of embodied presence, you can make a true assessment of your situation and what you need to do to improve. Those who practice TMW often talk about 'coming home to yourself'.

The paper 'An Embodied Predictive Processing Theory of Pain'⁷ (Kiverstein, Kirchoff and Thacker, 2022) proposes to

“If health is (in Gadamer's words) a 'condition of being involved, of being-in-the-world, of being together with one's fellow human beings, of active rewarding engagement in one's everyday tasks', pain can be thought of as a disruption of this 'being-in-the-world'. The result of such a disruption is that the world appears both threatening and alien to the subject.”

Kiverston, Kirchoff, Thacker⁷

explain pain in terms of processes distributed across the whole body from cell to whole. The authors theorise that the nervous, endocrine and immune systems function in a coordinated and coherent manner as a single complex adaptive system to maintain homeostasis. They refer to this system as the Neural-Endocrine-Immune (NEI) system. It captures some of the complexity but perhaps the danger of highlighting three systems in this way is that we will forget that these are always interacting in complex ways with all other systems as well as those eco systems (eg gut biome) within us, our immediate environment and wider world. I was particularly struck by the paragraph at the top of this page and the importance of 'being involved', of 'being-in-the-world.'

I've discussed this with people living with pain and long covid. They agreed that they no longer feel at home in their body or at home in the world. **I think TMW**

is helping people to feel at home in their body as it is, but also to feel at home in the world as they are. The 'as it is' and 'as they are' are important. Over time you can learn to live life from this place of 'as you are in the world as it is'.

“It's OK to be me as I am.”

Feeling Safe

Feeling safe is fundamental to being in a healing place. However, I don't believe you can think your way to a feeling of safety. You need to feel it. You need to experience it. TMW encourages feelings of safety in a few ways. In a state of embodied presence there is a natural relaxation and a feeling of calm, of being 'at home'. A feeling of safety. Kangaroo Tail gives us a means of achieving this. It's a useful tool to have in your tool kit in everyday life. Learning to find this safe space within us is important because it's always there regardless of what chaos is going on around you. No one can take it

“You can relish a rainbow and a cup of tea, sunrise and a flock of birds, a cemetery walk and a friend's newborn, the first blush of wild flowers in a patch of dirt and the looping rapture of an old favourite song. You can't tidy up the White House, but you can tidy up that neglected messy corner of your home: you can't mend a world, but you can mend the hole in the polka-dot pocket of your favourite coat. They are not the same thing, but they are part of the same thing, which is all there is – life living itself through us, moment by moment, one broken beautiful thing at a time.”

Sophie Blackall, The Marginalian (Maria Popova)⁸

away. The rhythmic movements of the sequence also enhance feelings of safety. Rhythmic movement is predictable. The brain likes things to be predictable. It makes it feel safe. The idea that you can find safety within yourself can have a profound effect on your life, whatever else is going on within it. It helps people deal with the uncertainty of life and fear.

It helps you to realise that although you may not be able to fix the world around you, you can mend yourself moment by moment, bit by bit – they are part of the same thing.

Self Kindness, Release

With the feeling of embodied presence and the support and safety of the ground beneath your feet, there is a natural relaxation in body and mind. Movements become more graceful, they feel caressing, and you can see this happening as the quality of movement becomes more flowing over the weeks. Self-kindness is emphasised. In my classes we learn that self-kindness isn't about sitting doing nothing with a box of chocolates, although on some days it might, in small doses. **I define self-kindness as nurturing your mind, body and soul remembering that your environment is a vital part of this.** This is difficult for many living with health problems as their own health and wellbeing is often at the bottom of their priority list. We talk about putting it as their top priority. Talking to themselves as they would to a best friend. There is usually a general realisation that this is not something they naturally do,

particularly if all their energies are going into caring for a partner or child. It's interesting and wonderful to see their self respect grow and the impact this has on their behaviour. One man told me **"I don't want to put junk food into my body anymore."** When your self-respect grows and you focus on self-kindness as self-nurturing you are less likely to behave in a way that is detrimental to your health and wellbeing.

"I've stopped punishing myself. I'm learning to be kinder to myself."

Returning to the TMW sequence, we encourage people to listen in to their body and ask "What do I need in this moment, today?" We may use stroking as an act of self kindness and compassion and this can be highly emotional. Stroking your head as if it is the head of someone you love, with kindness and compassion emanating from your heart, can be a powerful experience, particularly for those who rarely, if ever, experience the touch of another. Stroking the abdomen whilst taking thoughts to those organs and giving them thanks for keeping you alive can be a highly emotional moment. Most think of their body as

'letting them down' but this quiet act of thanks helps to change their perspective to one of realisation that actually 'My body is doing its best to keep me alive.'

Tears

In classes for those living with long covid there have been a lot of tears, and participants are encouraged to let them flow. They recognise that they have been holding their emotions in tightly. One young woman told me – **"When I first started to practise TMW the tears flowed freely and I let them, where previously I would have tried to hold them in. Now I can do the sequence without tears. I feel letting them flow was important."** We decided that allowing their tears to flow freely was an important, and often necessary part of their healing journey.

"Tears are evidence of our inner life overflowing its boundaries, spilling over into consciousness."
Rose-Lynn Fisher, The Typography of Tears ⁹

I wondered why I wasn't seeing this with other classes. The difference could well be that we are seeing people with long covid much earlier. We are validating their stories much earlier. I think this is something

"Tears are the medium of our most primal language in moments as unrelenting as death, as basic as hunger and as complex as rites of passage. They are the evidence of our inner life overflowing its boundaries, spilling over into consciousness. Tears spontaneously release us to the possibility of realignment, reunion, catharsis, intractable resistance short-circuited... it's as though each one of our tears carries a microcosm of the collective human experience, like one drop of an ocean."
Rose-Lynn Fisher, The Typography of Tears ⁹

we need to be aware of with those who have been living with pain, fibromyalgia and ME/CFs for many years. Over many years, many have become adept at hiding their emotions and holding them in tight.

This is what one lady told me **“Many people with fibromyalgia live with the symptoms for years before diagnosis. They are so used to a different life they are often resigned to it. They daren’t after this length of time let go as they may totally lose control. I know that’s how I feel, I daren’t relax at keeping my emotions in check. I am terrified my chronic pain and fatigue will overwhelm me and suck me into an abyss from which I can never climb up.”**

Perhaps we should consider how we can provide safe places and ongoing support to enable the release of these emotions, because this may be necessary before healing can happen?

Soft Limit

Earlier in this article I referred to the concept of ‘Soft Limit’, and this has been life changing for many. It is applied to the sequence but also to life and it applies to us all, so we’re not stigmatising those with ill health. It’s also better understood because it applies to us all. Over the last few years, in particular, health professionals will be only too aware of what it feels like to be pushed beyond your Soft Limit and the health and social consequences of this.

Soft Limit encourages us to be aware of where we over extend, and to move and live life to the limit of our softness. It is also about not restricting yourself or

holding yourself back for fear of failure, of being confident in your Soft Limit in that moment. If you are constantly holding yourself back or over extending, living beyond your Soft Limit, you are moving against tension and living life in a state of stress which will eventually make you unwell.

It’s not about staying in your comfort zone, it’s about knowing where your Soft Limit is in each moment and operating at that limit. We spend time talking about the process of exploring their baseline of activity and Soft Limit in the sequence and in life, and they are encouraged to think about their Soft Limit across a day, the week and their lives. I think Soft Limit is a kinder, more positive approach than Pacing. Most are familiar with the term ‘Pacing’, particularly if they have lived with pain for many years. However, they often don’t fully understand it in terms of bodily systems that have become more sensitive. How it doesn’t simply apply to the amount you ‘do’ in a day, it applies to all your senses. People in my long covid classes have found bright light, loud noise, watching action films and air temperature affects their Soft Limit. One man found watching action films exhausted him, another found cold weather drained his energy whilst another found watching the bug eating in ‘I’m a Celebrity’ caused a huge spike in her covid pain. We discuss how Soft Limit can be applied to work, commuting, and the importance of telling family, friends and employers. We have found that because it applies to everyone, people understand. Most people know what it feels

like to be pushed beyond Soft Limit and the feelings of tension / stress/distress this causes.

“I’ve got the confidence now to say ‘NO’ to family and friends when I know something will push me beyond my Soft Limit. To say I need to sit down or rest now. I’ve realised that they’ve always been OK with this, it’s not a problem for them. The problem was in me because I felt guilty at saying ‘NO’, at not being able to do what I was doing previously.”

Having the confidence to say ‘no’ is good. As author Matt Haig says, **“No is a good word. It keeps you sane. In an age of overload, NO is really a YES. It’s YES to having the space you need to live.”** Soft Limit doesn’t imply limiting your life as I think Pacing does. Rather, it’s about self-kindness, and applies to everyone. People understand it, and learn to apply and physically explore it in the sequence and then translate it across into their lives. Exploring it physically helps them to better understand as they can feel the tension that occurs when moving beyond their Soft Limit or when restricting themselves. Importantly, Soft Limit recognises that normal life is up and down, so you learn to assess your Soft Limit from moment to moment.

“I feel like life is possible again, I know where my Soft Limit is and how far I can push that Soft Limit and not have the three-day crash I used to have. Of course, I still get it wrong on occasion, but having tools, such as Kangaroo Tail, to use and lean on when I’m out and starting to feel overwhelmed, has

helped massively. There has been real progress and I know that TMW is a big part of this.”

People find it transforms their lives whether they are fit and well or living with health issues. It's about listening in to your body, exploring and knowing your Soft Limit, recognising that it's not static or fixed. It varies from day-to-day and moment-to-moment. An activity can be OK one day and not the next so it's very much moving away from the approach of Graded Exercise Therapy. It's about moving and living with relaxation rather than against tension. It's about learning to live life to your Soft Limit, not over extending or holding yourself back.

“The idea of Soft Limit and Kangaroo Tail as opposed to Pacing or getting through has been a huge relief. I can now see that it could be possible to live a more stable settled life instead of having to drag up energy to get stuff done and push from one thing to another with some things getting abandoned. It's made the future seem much more positive and open.”

It's about recognising when you've gone beyond and putting measures, such as extra rest and self kindness, in place to counteract this. It's also about recognising that external events outside your control will push you beyond, so knowing what to do when this happens. Recognising that there will be events such as a family wedding, for example, where you decide it's worth going beyond your Soft

Limit and planning these and the days around in advance. When they are comfortable with their Soft Limit we encourage them to explore nudging at it gently.

“Rather than separating activity and resting, it's a combination of the two, in my experience, that is a more helpful approach for everyone. A greater respect for the importance of rest can coexist with an understanding of how vital it is that we remain active and engaged in the world.”

Dr Gavin Francis, *Recovery*¹⁰

Being Slow, Kindness, and Rest

Modern lifestyles encourage us to be constantly busy, to push harder and further, to be more, to the extent that we learn to push through. Society measures our success by how busy we are. Rest is no longer valued. As I mentioned earlier, those in my long covid groups were taking this into their recovery and 'working hard at it'. It's OK to be slow, to take time. It's OK to stop and rest and to show yourself some self-kindness. We shouldn't feel guilty for resting. **Appropriate rest is an essential part of a healthy, balanced life and needed for the 'whole' to make sense.**

Balanced Body, Balanced Mind

Some people have restricted movement on one side – for example in a shoulder – causing imbalance in the body during movement. Conventional exercise will encourage you to push the restricted side to match the unrestricted one. You create a lot of tension, pain and imbalance when you do this. TMW is about moving with relaxation and balance. If you apply the understanding of Soft Limit to

your restricted side and mirror its range of movement with the other side, over time your range of movement will improve. I admit I was a bit sceptical at first,

but this has been incredibly effective for improving shoulder range in all my classes because they are **moving with relaxation and flow rather than against tension**. All participants attending my long covid classes had restricted shoulder movements, as do many who live with pain. As the body comes back into balance, the mind experiences that same balance.

“Just as we need pause between notes for music to sound good, and just as we need punctuation in a sentence for it to be coherent, we should see rest and reflection and passivity as an intrinsic and essential part of life that is needed for the whole to make sense.”

Matt Haig, *The Comfort Book*¹¹

Connection with Oneself

The feeling of embodied presence, sensing the safety of the earth, experiencing the flowing movements within Soft Limit, put you in touch with the quality of your engagement with yourself and the world. TMW enables you to connect to the heart of who you are and teaches us to be compassionate towards those parts of ourselves that are

challenging, and to accept the imperfections of humanity. It's about feeling at peace with who we are and knowing that we are enough as we are in this moment. We work on connecting to the 'you that is you', connecting to others around you, to the outside world, nature and the Earth with compassion that emanates from the heart.

We talk about connecting to the 'essence of you' – that 'you that is you' without the labels of the world. Some of the people I see have 8-12 health labels and it's easy to see how you can lose sight of who you really are. They get buried under these labels. As Matt Haig says, it does us all good to **“Check that our emotional armour is actually protecting us and not so heavy we can't move.”** It's about recognising those layers of life's armour that we have accumulated to protect ourselves from life's challenges and trauma, and learning to find ourselves under those layers, ensuring that armour is not so heavy we can't move under all those labels we're given in life. It's about learning that the person that is you is still there. You may be well hidden but you are still there. Creating space between you and those labels modern life has burdened you with.

“You don't have to continually improve yourself to love yourself...you were born worthy of love and you remain worthy of love. Be kind to yourself.”
Matt Haig. *The Comfort Book*¹²

When you connect to that safe place within you, you begin to grow confidence in yourself as

you are. Learning who you really are is important for knowing how to nourish your mind, body, soul.

“The best thing is that you've taught me that it's OK to be me. I am enough as I am. It's been a revelation to learn that it's OK to be me as I am.”

As classes progress, we work on developing this sense of connection and identity. In the sequence there is a move called 'Here am I' which we can use specifically for this, and people can get quite emotional when practising it. They often feel a sense of empowerment as they say to the world **‘Here am I as I am’, ‘I am enough’, ‘I have a right to be me’, ‘I'm OK as I am’**. It's OK to be me within my Soft Limit. I don't have to be any bigger, or any more, and I don't have to restrict myself. I can be me and be proud of it. This is such an important message.

Modern life, social media is constantly pressurising people to 'be more', to do more. It makes people feel inadequate. This is made worse if you're living with a long-term health issue. TMW helps people to have confidence to be in the world as they are, regardless of their symptoms and labels they've been given.

As we approach the end of the sequence, we take this connection deeper and out to others in the group, the wider world and the elements that keep us alive. We are intrinsically connected to other people, animals, plants, the elements, our planet Earth. We aren't just part of nature, we ARE nature, and the covid pandemic has given us a bruising reminder

of this. TMW encourages us to feel this connection with others and the elements that are a vital part of us.

Breath

There is no breathing technique in TMW, the moves follow the natural breath. If they are unable to move to their natural breath at first because of breathlessness, they are encouraged to focus on the flow and rhythm of the moves, and over time breath becomes naturally longer and slower. In our long covid groups there was an improvement in breathlessness scores across the board at the end of the six-week course. **“Moving with my breath has helped me let go of the tension around my shoulders which means I can lift my arms a bit higher.”**

In later TMW classes, we bring everything together. Each time they practise the sequence they are encouraged to notice how they feel before and immediately after. To notice the contrast as proof that change can happen.

Comments at the end of a sequence often include –

“I feel calmer and slower”

“It was nice to be slow”

“I feel as if I've had a whole body massage”

“It's a strange feeling, it makes me feel relaxed and calm but energised at the same time”

“It always makes me feel better than before”.

As participants progress into ongoing classes TMW takes them into a deeper meditative-like state. With practise, they learn to move as a 'whole' – the whole of their mind/body/breath moving and flowing as one. This is important because pain pulls your attention to the body part where you feel pain, which can

then become 'separated' from the 'whole'. Moving rhythmically as a whole mind/body in sync with breath enables you to reach a point where you are no longer 'doing' the moves but are 'being' them which takes you to a deeper level.

Learning to move with rhythm, joy and safety as a unified, whole

mind/body can enable people to experience a sense of peace and safety within themselves, creating a space that optimises potential for healing. I would argue this should be an essential step in our treatment of those who seek our help. An added benefit, as I have discovered, is that it can have significant benefits for you, too.

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