In the previous issue of JAPA, the outgoing and incoming editors suggested that a discussion of JAPA’s mission, particularly as it relates to the definition of exercise/physical activity and developmental issues of older adulthood, be encouraged. This letter to the editor continues that discussion. We welcome, space permitting, letters pertaining to critical issues in aging and physical activity.

Dialogue on JAPA’s Mission: Mind–Body Exercises Are “Physical Activity”

First, I want to thank Jennifer Etnier for opening a dialogue about the interpretation of JAPA’s mission and presenting the editors’ challenges about deciding whether manuscripts comply with JAPA’s intention and present mission centering on the relationship between aging and physical activity. Second, with this letter I want to argue for an inclusive definition of “physical activity”—one that embraces traditional and contemporary mind–body exercises such as Alexander technique, Feldenkrais, Qigong, Tai Chi, and yoga.

By some, mind–body exercises are considered neither a substantial increase over resting energy expenditure nor light-intensity activities of daily life. In fact, the energy expenditure of mind–body exercises can vary from low to high and depends on which poses or movements are selected for a program (Chao, Chen, Lan, & Lai, 2002; Jahnke, Larkey, Rogers, Etnier, & Lin, 2010). Most mind–body exercises provide a wide variety of options. For example, a Tai Chi program can use more than 100 moves or as few as 24, restorative yoga poses are less challenging than those of power yoga, and Feldenkrais programs can be designed for athletes, people with a sedentary lifestyle, or those with compromised health. Similarly, the cognitive challenge of mind–body exercises can vary from simple to sophisticated poses or movements. Energy expenditure and the complexity of mind–body exercises need to be considered a continuum of physical activity. Practicing mind–body exercises contributes to the reduction of sedentary behavior and to an increase in physical activity (Jahnke, Larkey, & Rogers, 2010). Clearly, mind–body exercises have a role to play in the realm of physical activity.

For decades we have known that regular physical activity has numerous positive effects on health. Despite this evidence, exercise participation and adherence are poor, especially among older adults, most of whom prefer exercise programs with moderate to low exertion (Burton, Khan, & Brown, 2012). Gentle mind–body exercises in a noncompetitive environment are an alternative option for older adults. Although we have less knowledge about the effects of mind–body exercises, they show promising results for the improvement of health and well-being of older adults and warrant further investigation (Batson & Barker, 2008; Chang, Nien, Tsai, & Etnier, 2010; Greendale, Huang, Karlamangla, Seeger, & Crawford, 2009; Liu & Frank, 2010; Rogers, Larkey, & Keller, 2009; Ullmann & Williams, 2011; Vrantsidis et al., 2009).
The likelihood of experiencing health challenges increases with age, and these challenges can cause pain and compromise mobility and body movements, which in turn poses a barrier to exercise participation and may lead to poor adherence to regular physical activity. Considering the increasing number of older adults and their low level of physical activity, there is an urgent need to investigate novel and alternative approaches and to design and offer a variety of effective activity programs for older adults.

Mind–body exercises have gained popularity over the last decades. Jesse Jones and Debra Rose (2005) devoted one chapter of their book to “Mind–Body Exercise Training.” Strategic objective No. 1 of the Third Strategic Plan: 2011–2015 of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine is to advance research on mind–body interventions, practices, and disciplines (National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, 2011). To respond adequately to the demands of the increasing and more diverse aging population, it is of paramount importance to explore all options that may facilitate the health of older adults. To my mind this includes recognizing the need to investigate mind–body exercises and to provide a forum for presentation and discussion pertaining to the research on exercise and physical activity.

Gerhild Ullmann, Clemson University

References


