

# *Qigong as Holistic Healing to Counter Health Harms of Social Injustice*

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## **Abstract**

Social injustice damages people's health in many ways, causing an urgent call for comprehensive effective treatments for these harms. However, a holistic approach is needed for several reasons, foremost among them: to help people recover from both physiological and psychological afflictions; to prevent their persisting impacts from creating further damage; and to maintain bodily and mental well-being in the midst of these systemic threats. Extensive research evidence indicates that qigong, a traditional Chinese practice for promoting health, provides an efficacious holistic means of meeting the multifaceted needs for this kind of health recovery. The aim of this paper is to offer a review of the research on both the health impacts of social injustice and also the holistic healing capacities of qigong to address the multipartite health harms involved. Finally, the limitations and implications for research and practice are discussed.

**Keywords:** *qigong, holistic healing, social injustice, healthcare inequities, embodied movement, chi kung, traditional Chinese medicine*

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## **Introduction**

While a large body of research has established qigong as an effective practice for holistic well-being (Jahnke, et al., 2010), a recent search revealed little has been written about the ways in which qigong can be used to mitigate the health impacts of social injustice and healthcare inequity. This article will begin with an overview of three streams of research which demonstrate: how social injustice impacts people's health holistically, how wellness self-care functions as a remedy for those impacted by and/or working to change social injustice, and how embodied movement self-care heals the health harms of social injustice. The

paper will continue with a review of the research evincing how qigong provides: a prime embodied movement practice, an effective wellness self-care application, and a holistic healing modality. The analysis will then integrate the two areas of research to show how qigong can be used as an effective wellness self-care treatment for the holistic healing of the physiological, psychological, and combined mind-body traumatic harms of social injustice.

## **The effects of social injustice on people's health**

*Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.*

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

Social injustice affects almost every area of people's lives and leads to inequities not only in education, employment, income, social position, police protection, legal sentencing, and government representation, but also in healthcare and even life expectancy. The deadly effects of social inequality are put into stark relief by Marmot (2015), who reveals that there exists as much as a 20-year difference in life expectancy between males living in poor versus well-off areas of Baltimore, MD. The evidence he presents clearly shows that the declining life expectancy among the poor in the United States signals how social injustice is killing people on a grand scale.

Gutin and Hummer (2021) write that despite decades of progress in health science, the life expectancy of people in the United States is still predicted by the widening socioeconomic disparities across racial and ethnic groups. There is an undeniable increase in the extrinsic causes of death among those less privileged, creating a sharp deficit between what is biologically possible and what is socially attainable for the nation's least socially advantaged subgroups.

In addition to life expectancy, it is well-established that social inequities also lead to poor health outcomes for marginalized communities.

Macias-Konstantopoulos et al. (2023) found an overwhelming body of evidence that points to the inextricable link between race and health disparities in the United States. The nationwide calls for health equity and social justice have raised awareness of the impact of implicit bias and structural racism on the social determinants of health, healthcare quality, and ultimately, health outcomes.

Beech et al. (2021) explore in-depth how bias contributes to and perpetuates the economic and financial inequality that diminishes prospects for health improvement among marginalized racial and

ethnic groups. Until structural racism and economic injustice are resolved, the effects of socioeconomic deprivation in communities of color urgently cry out for health officials to implement critical intervention strategies to address the persistent racial/ethnic disparities in chronic diseases.

### **How wellness self-care becomes a form of social justice work**

*Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.*

— Audre Lorde

Under these unjust circumstances, it is a necessity for minoritized groups to engage in self-care as a means of thriving within unjust systems that continue to harm their bodies, minds, and existence. Wyatt and Ampadu (2021) investigate how self-care can be used as a wellness tool for Black communities facing multiple stressors including racism, discrimination, and navigating systems of oppression—all of which affect people's mental and physical well-being. These hazardous conditions underscore the importance for both individuals and communities to increase different self-care practices to achieve improved health.

French et al. (2019) advocate for radical self-care in the face of mounting racial stress and offer a psychological framework of comprehensive healing in communities of color that advances beyond individual-level approaches to coping with racial trauma. They build on existing frameworks rooted in social justice education and activism to describe forms of self-healing and transformation that integrate elements of liberation psychology, Black psychology, ethno-political psychology, and intersectionality theory.

But in addition to offering wellness to marginalized individuals, self-care can also be an activist way to create change in people's personal lives and local communities. Chen et al. (2019) recommend engaging in radical healing and wellness through self-knowledge, critical consciousness, collectivism, strength, resistance, and hope. They emphasize that the key feature of this approach to wellness is being able to resist oppression while moving toward freedom and wellness, and to cultivate the strength to manage both tasks through acts of self-care.

Ahmed (2021) goes further to say that as agents of social change, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) activists' own survival and health are in themselves a threat to the structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and supported violence, therefore reinforce the necessity for activists to care for themselves as they engage in the work of organizing for social justice. The ongoing systemic threats to the health and well-being of marginalized people call for wellness strategies that sustain both an individual and a collective response to oppression. Activist self-care can serve as radical political action when it supports deep and sustainable change in the person and the society.

### **How embodied movement practices help to heal the health harms of social injustice**

*Oppression spares no body. Injustices are both systemic and intimate, taking root in the flesh.*

— Mary Watkins

Now that the need for well-being self-care has been established for those who are harmed by and who work towards changing social injustice, the question arises as to which wellness approach is best suited for these purposes. The connection between social injustice and its impacts on the body has garnered much research in recent years and indicates which type of self-care is most

efficacious for those harmed by social injustice and healthcare inequities.

Brown et al. (2004) endorse embodied health practices for three main reasons: 1) they introduce the biological body to social movements, as its health is usually concerned; 2) they typically include challenges to existing medical knowledge and practices; and 3) they often involve activists collaborating with scientists and health professionals in pursuing treatment, prevention, research, and expanded funding. In her book *Embodied Social Justice*, Johnson (2022) introduces a body-centered approach to working with oppression, explaining that for the challenges of dismantling injustice in a biased world, it is necessary to understand how the body is implicated in social justice work, and how to engage our bodies in the process of activism.

On healing injustice, transformative justice, and holistic self-care for those harmed by inequities, Pyles (2020) writes that for marginalized people, the self-care movement has often ignored historical trauma and the ways that interlocking oppressions contribute to stress, trauma, moral injury, and burnout. Relying on the evidence base of mind-body transformative practices, healing injustice is best addressed in a holistic framework, a set of practices for the whole self that includes the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, social, and ecological selves. Drawing on somatics, neuroscience, critical social theory, and trauma-informed anti-oppressive education, King (2022) recommends practical strategies for interrogating and transforming the political realities of life and uses the felt experience of people's individual and collective bodies as the ground for social justice work. Her work uses scientific research that has pioneered exploration of the relationship between mindfulness, movement, and embodied education as a liberating anti-oppression practice and for trauma-informed cultural transformation.

Based on the evidence above, this paper supports the research that recommends embodied movement self-care practices as effective interventions on many levels to heal the health harms of social inequities and health care inequities. The trauma inflicted by experiences of social injustice harms marginalized people in both psychological and physiological ways, and therefore embodied practices are particularly well-suited to heal trauma of all kinds, because they address the mind, body, emotions, and overall health concurrently (Liang, 2024).

### **Qigong as a holistic healing embodied movement self-care practice**

*Qigong is a mind-body biopsychosocial wellness practice in a new category of exercise called Meditative Movement.*

— Harvard Medical School

Most research on embodied movement practices has focused on yoga, somatic, and dance therapies, but this class of self-care wellness modalities also includes Feldenkrais, the Alexander Technique, and the more established Chinese healing traditions of tai chi and qigong (Schmalzl, 2014). All of the embodied healing practices can make therapeutic use of the body and movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual for the purpose of improving health and well-being. What makes qigong especially efficacious for the purposes of this investigation is its comprehensive holistic nature, incorporating what the Harvard Medical School and Osypiuk et al. (2020) define as a mind-body biopsychosocial wellness practice. Essentially, qigong heals the whole person on many levels simultaneously: biologically, psychologically, and even socially.

Qigong is an ancient practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) that naturally heals the body, balances the emotions, sharpens the mind,

and raises consciousness. The word qigong means bio-energy cultivation in Chinese, and it is a holistic wellness system that blends posture, breathing, meditation, visualization, movement, and self-massage to maintain vibrant health (Kuhn, 2004). Qigong shares the same theoretical roots and common operational components as TCM with similar practical wellness applications and health promoting qualities. Both implement what TCM describes as the three regulations, which modulate several health systems synchronously: the body (musculoskeletal), breath (cardiorespiratory), and mind (neurocognitive) (Cohen, 1999). This example succinctly demonstrates how the holistic nature of qigong is deeply instilled into its conception, design, implementation, functions, and outcomes.

For self-care, Schnauzer (2006) qualifies qigong as an integrative art of self-healing and an excellent means of self-care for healing all kinds of wounds, be they physical or emotional. It is safe and simple, easy to learn, can be practiced just about anywhere, requires no special equipment, and importantly for socioeconomically disadvantaged people, it can be free. Classes to learn the movements are usually low-cost, but there are free videos available online to show anyone how to practice qigong. This makes qigong an excellent self-care practice to learn despite the person's health or cultural background (Haroth, 2022).

### **Qigong as physiological healing for the harms of social injustice**

*In the silence between breaths, listen to the wisdom of your body as it speaks the language of Qi Gong.*

— Li Wei

Before demonstrating how qigong can function as an exemplar embodied movement self-care practice to treat the bodily health harms of social inequities, it is necessary to understand the ways in which social injustice makes people physically ill. Public

health researcher Arline Geronimus (2023) makes the case that marginalized people suffer from the constant stress of living with poverty and discrimination, which damages their bodies at the cellular level and leads to increasingly serious health problems over time. The term for this type of chronic stress was coined from the title of her book *Weathering*, which describes weathering as the environmental and sociological factors that wear down the heart, arteries, neuroendocrine systems, and key biomarkers so much that the body systems age at an accelerated rate.

With regard to the chronic stress of weathering, van Dam (2020) concluded qigong was effective for individual stress reduction and for providing an effective means to recover from stress's physiological and mental activation, to prevent stress symptoms from recurring, and to improve one's physical and mental well-being going forward. For maintaining heart and artery health, Wang et al. (2016) reviewed several randomized controlled trials and determined the studies demonstrated that qigong effectively improved physiological outcomes, biochemical outcomes, physical function, quality of life, and depression among patients with cardiovascular disease. As for endocrine system wellness, Lin et al. (2018) found that when studying acute physiological and psychological effects of qigong exercise in older practitioners, qigong had a positive influence on the functioning and condition of the neuroendocrine system and the support systems for those corresponding organs. And impressively with regard to key biomarkers, Mazzocco et al. (2023) made the case for choosing qigong as an integrated intervention in cancer care, because two meta-analyses and three systematic reviews of studies investigating the effect of qigong practice using biomarkers as outcomes showed significant results in improving the levels of these biochemical facets.

In addition to weathering, Geronimus (2023) indicates several specific health harms caused by social injustice. Most stem from physiological responses to chronic stress, which include an increase of stress hormones in the bloodstream, higher rates of diabetes, higher blood pressure, and persistent fatigue. With regard to the chronic increase of stress hormones in the bloodstream, Ponzio et al. (2015) determined qigong training reduces basal and stress-elicited cortisol secretion in healthy older adults. To address the higher rates of diabetes, Sun et al. (2010) found significant positive effects from qigong on glucose control in Type 2 diabetes in a randomized controlled pilot study. For reduction of high blood pressure, Dong et al. (2021) did a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials on the effects of qigong for hypertension and found that qigong has significant positive effects on systolic and diastolic blood pressures. To counter persistent fatigue, Wang et al. (2021) did a systematic review and meta-analysis on the efficacy of qigong exercise for treatment of fatigue and found that the intervention was somewhat beneficial for improving fatigue in patients diagnosed with various diseases. However, Chan et al. (2013) did two randomized controlled trials on qigong exercise for chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) to discover a significant dose-response relationship and concluded that qigong should be recognized as a possible standalone therapy and self-management skill for CFS.

### **Qigong as psychological healing for the harms of social injustice**

*It's important to understand the foundational principles of Qi Gong so you can use it to release emotional baggage and toxic thought patterns.*

— Lee Holden

In addition to the bodily damage caused by social injustice, there are equally devastating impacts on marginalized people's psychological health.

Williams (2018) did an overview of research on race-related stressors that can affect the mental health of socially disadvantaged racial and ethnic populations, and found not only that minoritized people were likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, substance abuse for release of tension, and low self-worth, but also that when Blacks and Latinos experienced mental illness, their episodes tended to be more severe, persist for longer periods of time, and be more debilitating than for any other race/ethnic group.

However, the research confirms that qigong can mitigate these psychological harms as well. Chan et al. (2013) found that qigong exercise significantly reduced anxiety and depression symptoms and created hormones in the bloodstream that contribute to anti-depressive effects in people. Wang et al. (2013) systematically reviewed the effects of qigong on anxiety, depression, and emotional well-being and concluded that the preliminary evidence suggested that qigong had positive effects on psychological welfare of patients with chronic illnesses. Guo et al. (2019) did a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials on qigong-based therapy for treating adults with major depressive disorder and found it to be an effective complementary intervention. Wang et al. (2014) performed a systematic review of randomized controlled trials on managing stress and anxiety through qigong exercise in adults and concluded the evidence suggested that qigong exercise immediately relieved anxiety among healthy adults.

With regard to efficacy for substance abuse problems listed by Williams, Cui et al. (2022) did a meta-analysis of the impact of qigong exercise on a total of 1072 patients with drug addiction and produced results showing that qigong had a significant overall effect on depression, anxiety, and quality of life in drug users. Chen et al. (2010) explored the feasibility and efficacy of adding integrative qigong meditation to residential

treatment for substance abuse and discovered it contributed positively to addiction treatment outcomes, with results at least as good as those of an established stress management program.

As for the self-esteem issues indicated by Williams, Jahnke et al. (2010) reported that self-esteem significantly improved from interventions of qigong and tai chi. Lee et al. (2007) found in their randomized controlled trial that both self-esteem and quality of life self-evaluations ameliorated with tai chi/qigong practices, showing qigong's potential to enhance psychological well-being. But stronger evidence was produced by Terjestam et al. (2010) in a clinical trial where the group that practiced qigong showed reduced psychological distress and improved self-image, whereas no changes were found in the control group.

### **Qigong as healing for the trauma of social injustice**

*What can be dealt with are the imprints of the trauma on body, mind, and soul.*

— Bessel van der Kolk

*Qigong uses exercises to improve the flow of energy within the body, mind, and spirit.*

— Michelle Loy, MD

Although trauma could be included under the discussions for psychological harms or physiological damage, it will be addressed under its own heading because the profusion of research on trauma caused by social injustice demands separate attention. Trauma affects the body as much as it does the mind. Therefore, it requires a distinct health intervention that heals the mind-body holistically. van der Kolk (2014) writes there is a growing body of evidence that trauma leaves an imprint not only on the brain but also on the body, signifying the value of broadening our understanding of and approach to healing trauma

(p. 15). Sabnis et al. (2021) confirm that oppression is tied to trauma because it exposes people to traumatic events while denying them access to the needed means for healing the traumatic wounds and that it should come as no surprise that empirical studies have found trauma to be disproportionately concentrated in and experienced by minoritized communities.

Therefore, if social injustice traumatizes marginalized people in both mind and body, then the healing for that trauma needs to encompass the whole person. Schmalzl et al. (2014) designate qigong among the more effective practices grounded in the concepts of embodiment, movement, and contemplation that can engage the cognitive neuroscientific healing necessitated for many mind-body illnesses, such as trauma, stress, and PTSD. In support of this inference, Grodin et al. (2008) did a preliminary case series using qigong for treating survivors of torture and refugee trauma and found that the results from observations of four cases and a review of the literature supported the potential efficacy of incorporating qigong into their treatment. The study concluded that using qigong for healing trauma survivors merited further investigation. Niles et al. (2022) did a systematic review of research on qigong for trauma-exposed populations and found evidence that qigong is safe, feasible, and acceptable for post trauma individuals. While it appears to improve well-being and functioning and to reduce post trauma symptoms, they recommended that more rigorous clinical trial methodology was needed to advance the field.

### **Qigong as transformative healing to move beyond harms of social injustice**

*When it is overcome, Qigong for trauma can transform, opening to new horizons and a way to align our body, mind, and spirit.*

— Master Tevia Feng

While it is promising how effective qigong can be in healing the trauma caused by social injustice, there is an additional process that trauma survivors can undertake in order to move the healing process a step further and hopefully to bring it full circle. Healing from trauma can create justice in people's intrapersonal and interpersonal lives and even produce value and meaning from the healing process itself. In *Healing Invisible Wounds: Paths to Hope and Recovery in a Violent World* Mollica (2008) argues that people have an inherent ability to heal themselves and focuses on the relationship between personal healing and the healing of collective wounds—which may or may not include the legal and institutional remedies that are goals of social justice. Bies and Barclay (2024) explore the importance of healing in itself to address the pain and trauma of injustice as well as the role of justice in that healing process. Healing can serve as a motivating force when people desire justice, as a curative salve when people enact justice, and even as the desired end state of working towards a more just society. In doing so, marginalized people can facilitate healing from the pain and trauma of injustice and thereby enable the transition from injustice to justice (Mollica, 2008).

Qigong has also been studied for its ability to create personal meaning not only in recovery from trauma, but also in the healing process itself, and thereby producing a transformative consciousness and better understanding of life. Confirming it as a vehicle for this transformational healing process, Lazzarelli (2022) identifies qigong as a somatic modality wherein practitioners can benefit not only from its physical and psychological healing properties, but also its use to better understand the dynamics between embodied learning, consciousness, and society, which is particularly helpful for those healing from the trauma of social injustice. And finally, qigong can also restore a sense of meaning—if not justice—in this life. Sheard and Davidson (2023) used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to inquire into how the

sustained practice of qigong contributes beyond the relief of physical conditions and can produce an improved self-awareness and appreciation of life. Their data revealed insights into how the embodied experience of practitioners produced nuanced meaning-making and how this contributed to a transformative understanding of themselves and of life. The research concluded that qigong presented a promising intervention to improve physical, psychological and metaphysical well-being.

### Conclusion

The research is convincing that qigong can offer an effective and feasible holistic health treatment for healing the multi-faceted harms of social injustice and healthcare inequities. This paper has sought to lay out a theoretical framework supported by an empirically researched foundation, and while the research presented is decidedly promising, future studies are needed to examine the application and implementation of this theoretical framework. In addition, much of the current research is devoted to racial and ethnic populations, and a broader spectrum of people for this intervention needs to be applied to the different statuses of the population with regard to biases against sex, age, socio-economic class, educational attainment, and sexual orientation. Still further research needs to be done on qigong practitioners of diverse backgrounds and their responses to items regarding how the practice of qigong has helped them cope with the various physiological and psychological harms attributable to social injustice and whether or not qigong helped them manage health stressors, regain homeostasis, instill mind–body balance, and recover from illnesses. As for the more nuanced but equally important measure of quality-of-life level, it would be interesting to determine if diverse practitioners of qigong have experienced enhanced senses of self-awareness, well-being, support, equity, belonging, meaning-making and appreciation of life. Finally, future studies are also needed to explore ways in which qigong can be

used as a multicultural intervention in clinical, workplace, and educational settings to promote wellness self-care in the midst of ongoing systemic threats to people’s health from social injustice and healthcare inequities.

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### Author Bio

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