

## Taekwon-Do and the Mature Student by Sonya Robinson

It amuses me that in Taekwon-Do, one becomes a veteran at the tender age of 36. Certainly at the beginning of 1900 the average life expectancy was only 47. As at 1997 it had increased to 74 for men and to 79 for women.

In the past couple of years I've had the privilege of working part-time in a retirement village and noted the huge variances in quality of life for the residents even though they are all sharing the same environment. There were a couple of individuals in their 90's that were still walking unaided, but also a number of "younger" residents in their 70's and 80's resigned to using sticks or walkers if they were to move out of chairs at all.

This got me to wondering what the future could be like for those of us "veterans" that still tread the floors of the Dojang.

According to the ITFNZ Incorporated 2008 Annual Report put together by Mr Kris Herbison, as at the end of 2008 we have 2,852 registered members. Of those approximately 80% of our Members are aged 35 years or younger. If you are aged over 36 and doing Taekwon-Do then you are part of a special population.

Another interesting point is that 1505 or just over 52% of our members are part of a family group. This shows us that Taekwon-Do is an activity that all members of a family can practice together.

In my case, I started Taekwon-do (at 33) to get away from my children. They were only 2 and 4 at the time, and anyone who can remember their own children at this stage, would probably understand the attraction. I had always wanted to try a martial art but somehow never got around to it and then I found myself requiring a healthier outlet for all the frustrations that parenting young children can bring.

My children, now at 10 and 12 (stop counting!) are also doing Taekwon-Do, and sometimes my husband - currently a yellow stripe, joins in too, so yes my family would all agree that Taekwon-Do is an activity that can be enjoyed together.

One of ITFNZ's strategic outcomes is to retain our members for life. Given that in the western world, the fastest growing age group is 90's plus, this will be quite a challenge. At this stage we do not have a Taekwon-Do practitioner in New Zealand of that age, the oldest, according to the 2008 Membership by age graph - if my eyes serve me right, is in their early 70's.

I often hear people around me saying "Didn't you know that 40 is the new 30, and 30 the new 21!" for which I'm really grateful since I'm well over 30 now but I just don't feel that far off it.

I believe that doing Taekwon-Do has helped me feel the youth of my years rather than my age (except for after this Grading probably) so I thought that I would ask others in the same age group for some feedback on their experiences of Taekwon-Do and share it with you.

I put a post on our ITFNZ website requesting answers to 4 questions from those aged over 35 years of age and received 32 responses in total – 24 Male and 8 Female which is a similar ratio to the actual number of male to female Taekwon-doins in this age group, so thanks for that and thanks to those who provided responses.

The first question was “How long ago and why did you start doing Taekwon-Do?”

There were two distinct groups of answers here.

There were those that have been training for well over a decade i.e. started when they were just young things, and the majority of these people’s reasons for starting were more to do with wanting to try a martial art and then meeting up with people you’d like to spend time with. Or their mates were doing it, or they originally turned up to support somebody else and ended up getting hooked themselves.

The second group of veteran respondents to this question had started within the last 7 years and by far the majority of these people originally had no intention of doing Taekwon-Do, but ended up doing it anyway.

Some did intentionally join to support and train alongside their children.

There were a few that started because of their own need for increased fitness or desire for some self defence skills, but many started because they were sick of watching and waiting around for their children, plus it looked like too much fun!

One response to this question that I can really relate to was from a female whose males in the family were doing it and it looked like a fun way to keep fit.

This woman was going to the Gym but it wasn’t doing it for her. She felt that by doing exercise without focussing on “is this getting me fitter/slimmer” but on “am I doing this technique correctly” instead would motivate her more.

It is unfortunate that our current lifestyles requires us to “work” our bodies just to keep them in the shape that nature intended, but with climbing rates of obesity and diabetes in “developed” countries, that’s just the way it is.

I have often thought how Taekwon-Do is a form of fitness with more purpose than most. It is also a holistic practice, in that it requires a good mind-body connection.



**LIFE JUST HASN'T BEEN THE SAME  
SINCE MUM TOOK UP TAEKWONDO!**

My second question was “What is it about Taekwon-Do that keeps you going?”

There were lots of enthusiastic responses here.

“The people” was a big winner, the fitness and the challenge of improving.

We get a kick out of seeing others achieve and also enjoy working towards our own achievements.

“There is always something around the next corner that I can participate in that challenges my skill and fitness level...our class training is also always interesting, with new techniques being learnt every week”

Perseverance was mentioned more than once and the input from our Instructors was too.

The social side, the discipline, many mentioned the sense of community.

“Seeing progress with skills through practicing, the structure of being able to build on something that is layered in such a way that you don’t even realise you are improving. Also a good old fashioned blow out.”

One male stated “ having an opportunity to pass on knowledge to students and to try and make a positive influence on their lives. When I’m training I forget all the pressures of outside life and focus on the art.”

We like the goals, we like doing it with our children, we really enjoy being involved.

Another male respondent stated, “ ...doing it together with my son is the main thing. If I didn’t go then I think he would stop and I don’t want that to happen...”

Another respondent states ... “to share something like TK-D with my kids is very special because as teenagers they want to spend time with me; it brings us closer together”

I wholeheartedly agree with all of these sentiments – the physical and mental challenges are exciting, motivating, challenging but enjoyable, plus it’s really cool to be able to do something with your children instead of just being on the sidelines watching.

I’ve also found that it has helped keep the lines of communication open and I’m so grateful for those wonderful tenets of ours as they are practical “guideposts” to living a better life.

One of my favourite responses to the question of what keeps us veterans going was,

“The people...I love teaching, and breaking, and kicking, and punching. Oh heck, I love it all!!!”



The class abruptly stopped practicing. Here was an opportunity to not only employ their skills, but also to save the entire town.

The next question was “What aspects of Taekwon-Do do you find more challenging now as opposed to when you started?”

Losing flexibility, performing flying kicks, and longer recovery times were by far the most common responses.

Some mentioned the time you have to commit if you want to progress and the frustration of maintaining and/or improving fitness levels.

It would be very interesting to find out what our younger Taekwon-Doists responses would be to the same question.

We cannot deny that the systems of our bodies decline, as we get older. Our lives are finite and we are aging all the time.

There are however, various methods to classify age, so let’s take a look at some of them.

Chronological age – a statement of age based on the number of years that a person has lived since birth. Unfortunately we can’t change this one.

Functional age – a statement of age based on the individual’s functional ability in reference to others the same age i.e. comparison to the “average” individual.

Due to the fact that we have to train (and train quite hard, at times) to achieve the physical abilities to perform Taekwon-Do competently, I would be of the opinion that the majority of Taekwon-Do practitioners would have very positive functional ages across most of the chronological age groups and particularly at the older end of the scale.

Psychological age – a statement of age based on the individual's state of mind. Some older adults show the mental ability similar to others of their age; whereas others demonstrate a psychological profile that is typical of individuals who are younger (differences can be noted in ability to learn, remember and self-esteem).

Another big tick here in my book. Because Taekwon-Doins have to use our minds to remember our patterns, the theory, the Korean, to co-ordinate our bodies so that we can do things with the left as well as the right, we are always “using it” (our brains, that is) therefore not “losing it”, well compared to our couch potato and/or average counterparts at least.

Social age – a statement of age based on the individual's behaviour. Some older adults behave similar to others of their age, whereas others demonstrate behaviour that is typical of individuals who are younger.

Now this is where I think that Taekwon-Do also assists the older practitioner.

Doing something with people who are younger than ourselves helps keep us in touch with our own youth. Awesome.



However, back to some science and let's look at the physiology of aging.

Height. Over time, humans show a decrease in standing height. Females reach maximum height in their early teens, whereas males reach their tallest stature just before they are 20 years of age. From that time on there is a steady decline of height with each decade of age.

Weight. From birth we all increase in body weight. The average body weight for females continues to increase up to about 45 or 50 years of age and then stabilises until it begins to decline around 70 years of age. Males increase their body weight until age 40 and then show a slow decline in body weight over time.

Body Fat. As we age, body fat continues to increase. By 70 the average male has about 21% and the average female has about 39% of body fat. If yours is already more than that, then best you improve your self control and do something about it!

Muscle Mass. For most men and women around middle age (45yrs) muscle tissue begins to waste away and total fat free mass (muscle) begins a steady decline in age.

On average about 3 kg of muscle mass is lost in each decade – men lose about 5% muscle mass per decade and women about 2.5% per decade. The majority of muscle mass decline is related to the decline of growth hormone that comes with age and declining physical activity.

Bone Development. With every year of life, bone undergoes a process of remodelling where old bone is replaced with new bone. Somewhere around 35 years of age the rate of bone growth replacement falls behind bone loss and we begin to lose about 1% of total bone each year.

Joints. Comprised of a combination of bones, ligaments, tendons and connective tissue as adults age our joints lose a significant amount of flexibility. This loss of flexibility begins at the surprisingly early age of around 30.

The range of motion at most joints is severely reduced if stretching exercises are not performed regularly.

This all helps explain why flying kicks will become more difficult to perform as we age and also gives reasons for the feeling that we are less flexible.

On the flip side of this - if you have seen Mr Peter Graham - 5<sup>th</sup> Dan and Instructor of Meadowbank Club, who is in his mid 60's kick his leg up and land in the splits without injuring himself then you can accept that by stretching regularly and consistently you can definitely improve your own flexibility and whilst this won't help with jumping, it will certainly improve your kicks.

The Heart. The heart muscle experiences very few large or small changes due to aging alone. With age however, both the heart and the blood vessels become less sensitive to neurological stimulation. This reduction means the aging heart can't achieve maximum heart rates that were possible during youth. When an older adult begins to exercise (we are talking 60+ here), it takes the entire cardiovascular system longer to adapt to the increased workload.

Average resting heart rates for older adults are similar to those of younger adults. On the other hand, the maximum rate the heart can achieve during heavy exercise decreases by about 5 to 10 beats every 10 years. Also in older adults, the heart recovery from exercise is slower than in young people.

Anaerobic Capacity. As we age, older adults produce more lactic acid with exercise effort and the removal or clearance of the lactic acid produced is also slow. The aged anaerobic system is less efficient at producing energy anaerobically. The proposed reason for the decline is due to the decline in muscle mass and especially the loss of many of the fast twitch muscle fibres that are the anaerobic engine. The older adult also has reduced blood flow inside the muscle region, which also slows the recovery /clearance of lactic acid production with age.

This explains why older practitioners will feel hard workouts more than our younger counterparts and why recovery is longer.

In summary, generally as people get older their capacity to perform work declines.

There are however significant individual differences in work capacity at all stage of life. A physically active lifestyle has a positive impact for older adults.

“The more we move the better we feel. More active adults have the function and fitness of those much younger.”

An example of this was in a study done by Dr Miriam Nelson in Tufts University, Boston. She states “Working with mature adults, after 1 year of resistance training, women emerged from this study physiologically younger by 15 to 20 years, compared to when they began. It shows that women, and we believe men as well, can literally turn back the clock.”

So persevere, and keep going! As training Taekwon-doins, by striving to become better practitioners we are also improving our chances of living a superior quality of life.



Now that we are living much longer lives we also need to look at the psychological changes associated with aging.

As people age, they are continuously faced with the slow decline of their physical abilities, death of a spouse and/or friends, changing financial status, living arrangements and new social roles.

These losses are inevitable, accumulative and can be emotionally traumatic.

The acceptance of physical decline can lead to a great deal of fear and stress and this can often result in depression and anxiety.

Creating situations where older adults have the opportunity to be successful, perform physically, enhance idea of self, and gain social interaction have a great impact on emotional control and a feeling of self worth with age.

Sound familiar?



My last question was “What advantages (inside or outside of the Art) do you feel that you have developed over time as you have matured and continued doing Taekwon-Do?”

A lot of respondents expressed feeling physically fitter, having increased strength and flexibility, better balance and co-ordination and this has led to more confidence to go about their daily lives. This ties in with what we now know about aging.

Perseverance, increased patience and self-discipline were also mentioned many times.

Mental toughness, tolerance, and an excellent stress release. “A more global, thoughtful approach to problems rather than a knee-jerk reaction”

And from one male:

“Too big a question to answer. TKD has helped me in so many ways, through some very tough times. The people have helped me, and the discipline as well. I have learned my limitations, gained confidence, but most importantly I have life long friends. I wouldn’t have missed it for the world! And I have advantage in my own confidence, but against that is the understanding of how things can change and go wrong. It has made me cautious, confident, wise and happy...that has to be an advantage of sorts!”

Wow. What a gift we have in practicing our Art.

I hope that you are further encouraged and motivated to continue Taekwon-Do for many, many years after this as “it’s not the years in your life but the life in your years” and I believe the practice of Taekwon-Do has certainly assisted me with that.





“How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the strong. Because someday in life you will have been all of these.”

- George Washington (*Former President of the United States*)

References :

Growing Older Resiliently and Passionately Paper  
Presented by Dr Mike Milstein and Dr D Annie Henry

Dychtwald and Flower

Can-Fit-Pro Older Adult Fitness Specialist Certification Manual

Thank you for reading this Essay.