

Nia

The concept of finding joy through exercise is a relatively new one, at least in the western world. A new technique known as Nia encourages finding joy in movement through a blend of martial arts, dance and yoga..



In a tranquil studio on a Saturday morning, twelve barefoot women gather. Their needs are as varied as their ages and body shapes. Some seek physical fitness, others mental and emotional clarity and health - all have found answers in Nia.

Brisbane Nia Technique instructor Sophie Marsh invites the group into a circle and introduces the class focus. Today it is a foundation principle of Nia: Look for joy in all your movements. "When the body moves in a way that feels good, it naturally becomes stronger and healthier," explains Sophie, "If you momentarily lose the sensation of pleasure, 'tweak' your movement until joy comes back into your awareness." The music begins and as the class 'steps in', Sophie encourages students to leave behind cares, distractions and concerns.

Fitness professionals Debbie and Carlos Rosas developed Nia on the premise that movement can be a healing force. Nia is a cardiovascular program that achieves holistic wellness by combining movements and concepts from nine classic movement forms including dance, martial arts, yoga and body integration therapy based on the Alexander technique and teachings of Moshe Feldenkrais. Nia's blend of simple choreography and freedom of movement, set to upbeat and diverse music from around the world, results in a grounded yet openly creative experience that is accessible to all levels of fitness.

"Diversity is the best thing about Nia because it keeps people interested, and it utilizes the whole body," says James Garrick, director of the Center for Sports Medicine at St. Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco. Numerous studies have shown that regular moderate exercise results

in less depression and anxiety, better mental efficiency and speed, more restful sleep, more relaxation, more assertiveness, more spontaneity and enthusiasm and reduced cognitive decline.

While these benefits hold true for Nia, a study comparing Nia's mind-body integrated approach to traditional exercise found it more effective at combating anxiety than conventional aerobics. Since 1983, Nia has been employed in a variety of settings including hospitals, prisons, universities and health retreats to treat and combat depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders, substance addictions, obsessive-compulsive disorders, eating disorders and abusive behaviours.

In Nia, the body is used to heal the mind and spirit by joining muscular movement with introspection, intention, visualisation, imagery and expressiveness. Body language and verbal expression are also used to help bring forgotten feelings to the foreground of consciousness. By connecting with physical sensation, you begin to live a conscious life, to learn about yourself and work out in a way that's respectful to the body. Rather than following a rigid set of rules, Nia develops body awareness and encourages students to make movement choices that fit to their own personal rhythm and comfort level. It is this adaptability and empowerment of individual responsibility wrapped in a sweaty, fun, creative social experience that is building a passionate following in both the fitness and health industries in over 30 countries.

Through the hour long class, students explore a variety of moves - steps, stances, blocks, kicks, punches and stretches that are graceful, precise, powerful, sensitive, fluid, and rhythmic. Sophie explains, "Nia gives people permission to play and create, as they get fit. When I began as a student over 6 years ago, I was 18 kg heavier and battling post-natal depression. Now I'm a Blue Belt Instructor, enjoying the reward of seeing Nia empower people with emotional well-being, confidence, a positive self-image - and improving their physical mobility, strength, balance and agility. I love what Nia has done for me personally and I love what I see it doing for others!"

At the end of class, the group steps out of the Nia space, emerging into the sunlight. Some feel calm and introspective, others are energised, and chat like old friends. All are glowing, smiling and moving with greater ease and more awareness of their ability to sense joy in their bodies, minds and spirits.