

Addressing Qigong for:

Stroke & Brain Injury Survivors
And Those Who Love Them

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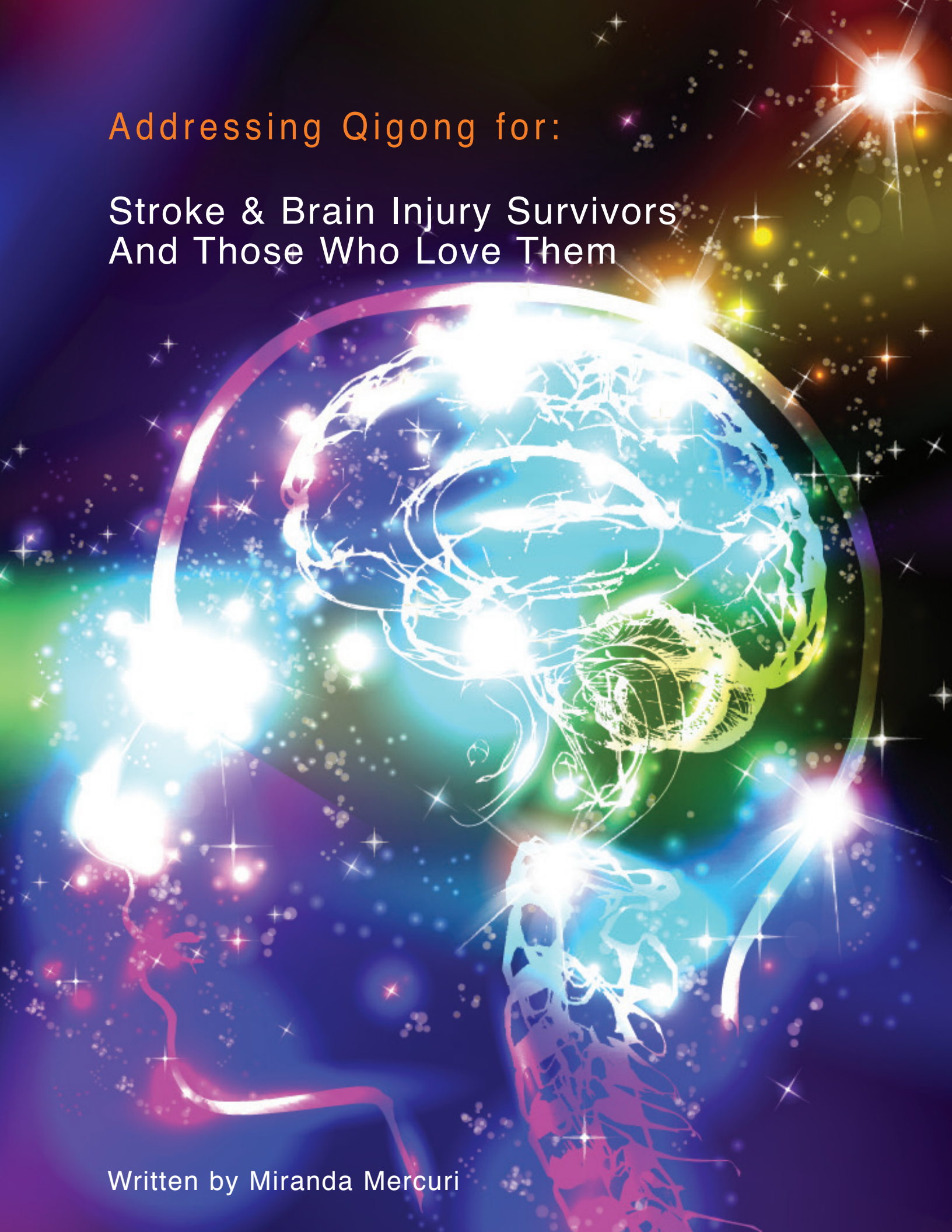




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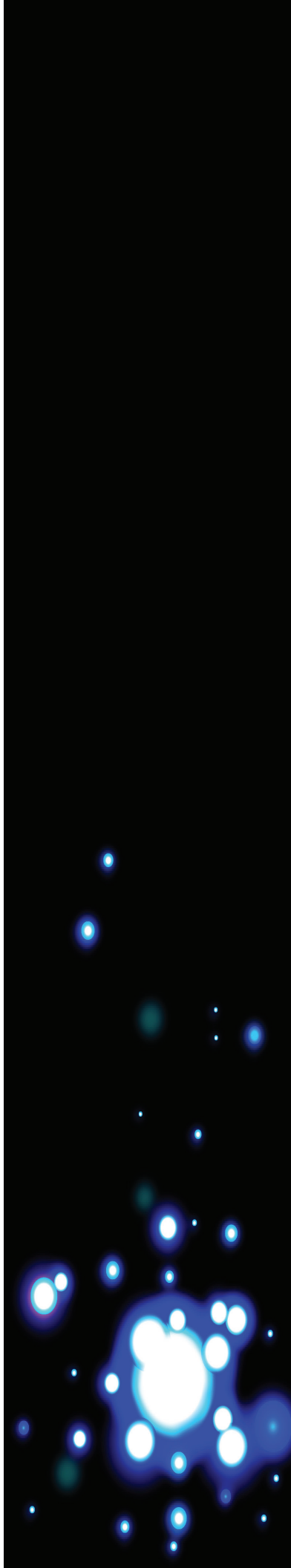
Introduction

FOR THE PURPOSE OF BRAIN INJURY SURVIVORS, THE CARE-GIVERS, FRIENDS AND FAMILY WHO LOVE THEM, THESE NOTES ON THE USAGE OF QIGONG FOR BRAIN INJURY ENCOMPASSES: STROKES, ANEURYSMS, AVM'S, TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY (TBI).

This journal is not a paid advertisement. I do not receive any financial compensation of any kind to write this. I chose to journal my experience for two simple reasons. First, I believe there is always room for growth and advancement in the care of brain injury patients. Secondly there is even more room for addressing the kind of support that is much needed for their caregivers. I have dealt first hand with traditional rehabilitation with very little relief. More concerning is no support for family members as they worry and struggle with how they are coping at home with a loved one who has experienced a brain injury. Third, I believe that when we enter a time of struggle in our lives, what we learn from those experiences can be shared with

others for the sake of helping others on the same or similar journeys to help them find solutions for what they may be going through. For the purpose of this journal I use the words brain injury to mean any of the following: stroke, aneurysm, AVB, TBI (traumatic brain injury).

This is merely a journal of my experience. This will not teach you QiGong as that is your instructor's job. What it will do however, is help you on your journey through QiGong as I understand the simple basic daily struggles one needs to overcome just to sign up for a class of any kind, but also to assist you in knowing that you are not alone in your struggles.



I WRITE THIS FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF HAVING HAD AN ANEURYSM, AS WELL AS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HAVING TAUGHT CHILDREN WITH PERCEIVED LEARNING DISABILITIES FOR 18 YEARS PRIOR TO MY BRAIN INJURY.

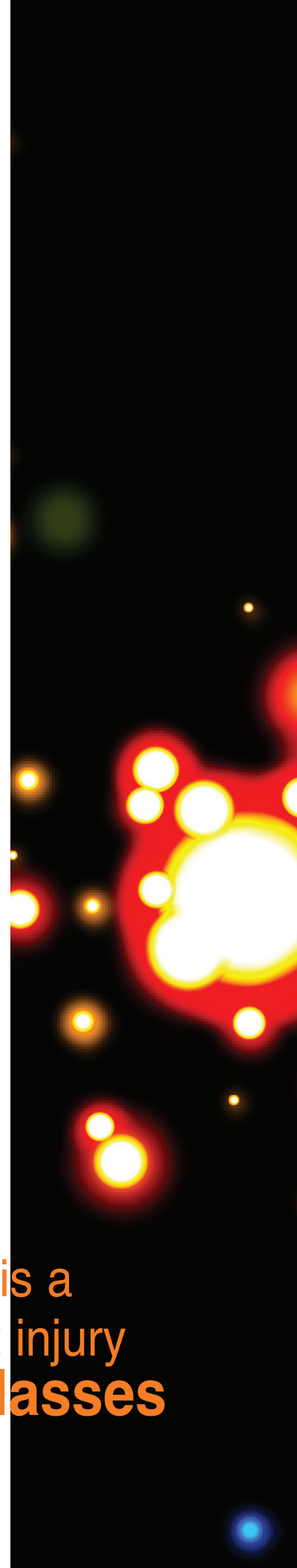
I have always been interested in how the brain processes information and the different ways in which people can interpret and learn the same things differently. When I worked with children with perceived learning disabilities, I was interested in how their thoughts, feelings and emotions are interpreted and how it impacted their school performance in light of their disability. Now I am writing this from the perspective of an adult, for adults with injuries to their brain and the link of post-stroke depression in relation to their cognitive performances.

In July 2008, I suffered an acute right frontotemporal subarachnoid hemorrhage secondary to a ruptured right middle cerebral artery aneurysm. I had a marked mass effect and midline shift to the left of my brain. I was treated with a craniotomy for clipping of my aneurysm and decompression of my brain.

For my QiGong friends and stroke survivors, I have journaled my experience with Qigong 7

years post-injury. It has been 7 years since my aneurysm that I wrote this only because this is when I had decided to take up Qigong classes. I don't believe that there is a good or bad time post injury to take Qigong classes. I do believe however, had I known of these before, my cognitive rehabilitation journey may have been less difficult and I would have saved those closest to me some grief. Alas! It is what it is.

**I don't believe that there is a
good or bad time post injury
to take Qigong classes**



Cognitive Deficits

AFTER A STROKE, NUMEROUS COGNITIVE DEFICITS ARE EXPERIENCED AND VARY IN SEVERITY AMONG INDIVIDUALS. IN THIS OUTLINE I MENTION THE ONES WHERE THE PRACTICE OF QIGONG HAS HELPED ME IN MY FIRST 12 WEEKS OF PRACTICING QIGONG.

Emotional Lability are emotional deficits that refers to very rapid changes in moods, where strong emotions or feelings are felt such as bursts of laughter, tears, or heighten irritability or temper are felt within minutes.

Sometimes they may be appropriate to the situation, but most often for observers, they are viewed as not appropriate or misplaced. It can be difficult for family and friends to understand the degree

to which one is reacting and difficult for the patient/client to understand how and why it is inappropriate. If one is experiencing a lack of awareness to their feelings as a result of the injury it becomes even more complex.

My angry outburst were highly inappropriate. At the time I was having them, I thought they were appropriate and very justified. My outbursts I believe were the result of not being able to verbalize my thoughts and feelings so that I could be understood by others. Aphasia, a language disorder that arises after a brain injury inhibits one's ability to choose words to meaningfully describe what they are feeling or thinking, thus creating

more emotional outbursts. Imagine trying to function in society where one cannot express their thoughts or opinions on different subjects pertaining to their care in a way that is understood by others. Instead, it becomes construed and the opinion of others of that person is they have changed are not the same person.

With Emotional Lability/Deficits I had enormous difficulty recognizing what my feelings were. At the beginning I was not aware of when I was feeling frustrated, happy, angry or fearful. I was not able to recognize them as they came up, so mostly I was a ticking time bomb not knowing when I would be in crisis.

Cognitive Deficits

After a stroke, numerous cognitive deficits are experienced and vary in severity among individuals.

In this outline I mention the ones where the practice of qigong has helped me in my first 12 weeks of practicing qigong.

Philip Lai one day explained to me the importance of being calm. I tried to imagine for a moment what “calm” was. I had come to the realization that I had no memory of this feeling. The feeling of calmness seemed to have disappeared from memory just as the other emotions had at the beginning of

ing somewhere and I could not come up with any at that time. I guess this was what calmness was. In the moment, I was not able to remember what that was. When I went home that evening, I tried harder to remember when I had felt calm. Could I describe what calm feels like? What does it look like. Slowly

recall where I was, when it was. I noticed that in some of the pictures, I started remembering who, what and where. I was now identifying the moments when I was calm in the pictures.

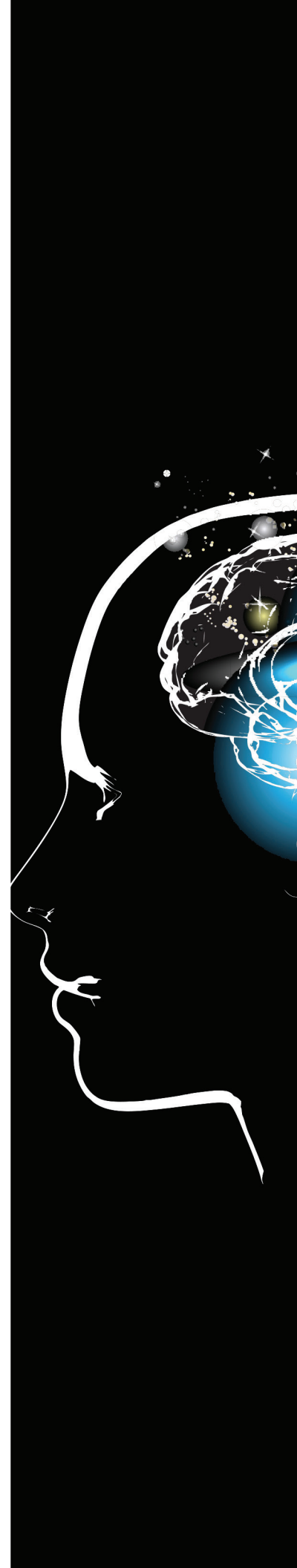
This experience is sufficient proof for me that repressed and suppressed emotions impair cognitive

“With Emotional Lability/Deficits I had enormous difficulty with recognizing what my feelings were”.

my recovery. Philip took me aside and showed me what calm was. When he was done his treatment, he asked me how I felt. I thought for a moment and really wasn’t sure what this was. I knew it was different then what I had been feeling and I was trying to find memories of this feel-

I was remembering my time by the water at Lac McGlashen in Quebec. My times in the canoe just floating and paddling away. This is calmness I remembered. I looked for pictures at home, old pictures. Pictures that used to bother me after my brain injury because I was not able to

deficits after brain injury even more. There is a correlation between cognitive impairments after brain injury and repressed emotions of anger, fear and sorrow. Oddly enough not being able to recognize calmness, had also blocked some memories.



Qigong and Emotional Lability

I am now able to use the tools taught to me in qigong classes regularly throughout the day to deal with emotional lability. Using qigong works well when used prior to the climaxing of emotions. For instance if you know you are entering a situation that may possibly cause stress such as going to a family event

where loud noises may be troublesome for you, doing the qigong exercises before leaving would be beneficial. The more you learn to associate with feelings of happiness and calmness the more you are able to access them when you wish to feel that way.

Post-stroke depression and suicide ideation

Suicide Ideation is the deep longing or wish to die without attempting to commit the act. Ideation is a passive form. One does not actually attempt the act of suicide. I got up every morning wondering why I was still here. The active form, is where one has attempted to end their life on one or more occasions. I suffered from the passive form of suicide ideation but many of my acquaintances in the brain injury rehabilitation centre suffered from the active form and made a few attempts. When things get difficult,

sometimes I still go through the process of suicide ideation on occasion. Sleeping was my only vice in order to not feel the feelings. Studies have shown that post-stroke depression can hinder cognitive rehabilitation. This means that cognitive functions used to perform daily tasks are even more limited because of depression, and it can make it that much more difficult to relearn daily activities that you used to do. If you experience difficulties with processing information, read-

ing, writing, aphasia, doing your finances, groceries, cooking, maintaining relationships etc....it is important to address the feelings of frustration, anxiety and loneliness surrounding these events. Addressing the emotions surrounding the injury will help you move forward and improve cognitive impairments as a result of your injury. The less depressed you are, the more positive you become then, the more likely you will try things that will help you to grow, to re-learn and improve your skills.

QiGong and post-stroke depression:

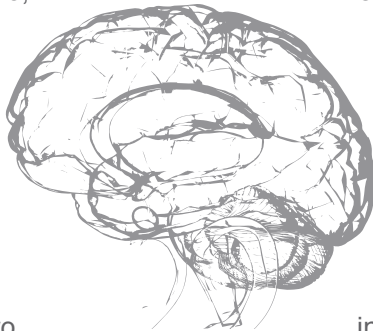
Qigong is a wonderful and safe opportunity for you to explore your emotions leaving a chance for your brain to heal and redevelop new pathways. Practicing qigong daily and attending classes with a qualified instructor allows you to release these emotions in a safe way.

Multi-tasking Exercises

In 2014 Harvard University did an MRI study on how meditation affects the brain. Proving that meditation literally rebuilds grey matter in as little as 8 weeks. This is a very promising study.

I did some meditation in qigong class, successfully for the first time.

I had tried meditations before, but found that my mind only meditated on thoughts I did not want to have, only heightening more negative experiences. The breathing and massaging two fingers allowed me to focus on the hand movement and the breathing at the same time thus eliminating any thoughts entering my mind. This process will help with your multitasking and dexterity abilities. Multi-tasking works the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, so if your injury affected your prefrontal cortex, this is an excellent exercise to practice even if it is weak. I could think about the movement while



breathing. It was a good feeling. The exercises in Qigong with regular practice will improve your multi-tasking abilities in the brain. If you are experiencing issues with multi-tasking at home such as holding a conversation and cooking a meal, practicing qigong can strengthen that part of your brain when done daily. Do

not underestimate the power of using mind and body simultaneously to improve the part of the brain that controls multi-tasking. When teaching children with learning disabilities I had used a program called Brain Gym. It involved both body and mind exercises to help improve fine and gross motor skills. Improving those skills using Brain Gym allowed them to be better at writing which is a fine motor skill; sports which is a gross motor skill; and visual memory retention they needed to perform well on spelling tests.

QiGong and Multi-tasking

These gentle exercises used in qigong allows you to practice multi-tasking. It has benefit me in other areas of my life. Being able to talk on the phone and take notes for instance, or cooking and holding a conversation in the kitchen. Listening to the instructor and performing the exercises is a form of multi-tasking.

Short-term Memory

THE NEXT POSSIBLE ISSUE I MIGHT HAVE I THOUGHT WAS BEING ABLE TO REMEMBER WHAT I HAD LEARNED IN CLASS SO THAT I COULD DO THIS AT HOME. BEYOND THE BREATHING AND FINGER TECHNIQUES I REMEMBERED NOTHING ELSE. NOW I STARTED TO QUESTION IF IT EVEN MADE SENSE FOR ME TO CONTINUE TAKING THE CLASS. THOUGHTS THAT FREQUENTLY ENTERED MY MIND WERE: THE DOCTORS WERE RIGHT, I'M INCOMPETENT; WHAT HAVE I GOTTEN MYSELF INTO; PERHAPS I'M DOING MORE THAN WHAT I AM CAPABLE OF DOING AND SO ON.

Philip Lai had sent videos via email that showed what we were practicing in class. Excited, I played the video and was able to practice at home. I had a tool now to accommodate my short term memory and now able to practice it daily with the aid of the video. This was fantastic. Short term memory loss is a concern, and having access to Philip's videos minimized the anxiety levels to be able to practice at home. It is important to practice at home with short term memory loss. The reason is, when you

go to the next class, you may have remembered a few things as a result of practicing, and it will leave that much more room in your brain to learn new techniques and minimize the stress of acquiring new information allowing you to benefit even more from the classes and the meditation if you are not stressed. It is an excellent exercise to work on short-term memory. By practicing or engaging in anything repeatedly you will acquire new pathways in the brain to enable you to strengthen your short-term memory

not only in qigong classes, but in anything else that

“... allowing you to benefit even more from the classes and the meditation if you are not stressed.”

you do in your day that involves your short-term memory. I don't believe in the traditional rehabilitation methods where you are told as a patient “just put your keys where you can find them” and you will.



The problem with a dysfunction in the brain causing short-term memory loss, is that while the good idea of putting your keys in the same place works for normal healthy people, it is an insane approach to try and get someone with a brain injury to do. If that worked, no one would have short-term memory issues after a brain injury years after the injury. It is important to do certain exercises to retrain that part of the brain doing different activities. It is no different than a weak muscle. If you have a weak leg, you don't

go running a marathon, you start out by doing other activities to gain strength in the muscle slowly until you progress to a level

that is comfortable for you. Short-term memory needs to be worked on, and we can do so using both mind and body exercises.

Traditional rehabilitation experts tend to give people with brain injuries who suffer short-term memory loss an agenda. This is a good concept for people without brain injuries who have difficulty with memory, but to someone with short term memory loss due to damage in the brain, having

an agenda is pretty pointless. The agenda gets lost. I must have a dozen of those agendas floating around the hospital with

my name on it somewhere.

If short term memory loss does not permit someone to remember where they put things, how will they remember where the agenda is when they need it?

Practicing qigong gives you the tools and the forum to enable you to practice that area of the brain to rebuild the pathways to short-term memory loss. The idea to rehabilitation is one cannot start off after an injury from where they left off before the injury. A baby doesn't

learn to walk before he crawls. Retraining a brain from a redevelopment point of view is the most effective way to relearn.

“Practicing qigong gives you the tools and the forum to enable you to practice that area of the brain to rebuild the pathways to short-term memory loss.”.

QiGong and short-term memory

Practicing the exercises to improve my short-term memory with the aid of the video and attending the classes allowed me to realize that short-term memory can be re-established. It's not perfect. We are not looking for perfection, but seeing improvements gives hope and raises self-confidence. If you have short-term memory issues and it is a concern, with the aid of the videos you can use at home, this will be very beneficial for you.

Fatigue

Brain fatigue is one of the most frustrating things to understand and overcome after a brain injury. I understand this very well. The first couple of years I was practically a couch mom. I mostly slept. In the 3rd-7th year I still slept a lot after any activity. It didn't seem to matter what I did. I required a 2-4 hour nap daily. No doctor has been able to remedy this issue. Every single day I had a nap. This was an intrusion on my day because it was such a large part of my day that was gone. However, a few years after my injury I decided to rehabilitate myself back to work by starting a home based business. This allowed me the luxury of being able to control the number of hours I would work in a day without an employer penalizing me. I was hoping this would put an end to my naps if I had some goals in life. Employers did not want me. After work however, I could barely make it home, and I would be found parked in any public parking lot sleeping in my car because the fatigue was so great that at times it would become an impairment to drive. This lasted nearly 3 years.

The only explanation I was told was that my brain was too fatigued by the activities I was doing and the activities I had chosen to do were very hard on my cognitive abilities and so I had to limit those activities. The idea in the rehabilitation centres is the more you do to tire yourself out, the more likely post-stroke depression is to occur so the idea is to limit what you do on any given day in order to manage post-stroke depression. While this is true, and I am not discrediting any sound medical advice, I also believe that the more you do to exercise your cognitive abilities with the goal of them becoming stronger, eventually allowing you to function at a semi-normal life as independently as possible, the post-stroke depression becomes less. There is a lot to be said about being able to function at a somewhat normal and reasonable ability to include yourself in society among your peers. This process does not come without a lot of effort and frustration. The key is to manage the frustrations and the expectations as well as having the right support group around you. If people were not supporting my desire for growth, I simply disassociated with them.

QiGong and Brain Fatigue

A week into practicing qigong using the videos at home I felt energized. This continued throughout the weeks I did qigong. My apartment is in order. My chores at work were done in record time. It is important to emphasize how important it was for me to not having had a nap everyday. For 7 years since the day of my injury I have required to have a nap after any activity: shopping, eating, working etc...

This was the longest period without a nap I had ever accomplished since my injury in 2008. Napping took a lot of my time, and secondly due to the fatigue, fitting things back to place where they are supposed to go was like an impossible puzzle for me. This resulted in always having a messy apartment. This was a nightmare for me especially having been someone with strong organization skills in the past. Having less fatigue allowed me to make sense of where things needed to go thus reducing daily frustrations and the time of finding things such as car keys, important paper documents when I needed them.

Suppressed Emotions

Feelings of frustration, anxiety and loneliness in both the caregiver and the person with the brain injury is often suppressed. Most often the person with the injury suppresses them so as to not upset those around them, and the caregivers suppress them because they do not want to show their feelings because they are trying to be the 'stronger' person. Often times when a spouse has a brain injury and can no longer do the things they used to do, there is what is called a shift in responsibilities in the home. For instance, the caregiver who never did the finances in the home may suddenly be overwhelmed with the task of now having to figure out the household finances, or be in charge of doing the groceries, cooking and other basic house chores that used to be

split between the couple. These added chores as well as the responsibilities that concern the care and general well-being of their spouse is added stress that is most often unexpected. This typically adds stress on the relationship where the couple now finds themselves in a situation that can at times feel so overwhelming.

On both sides of the relationship we know that these feelings don't go into a corner of the room, or disappear. They become layers and layers of suppressed emotions. If we get to a situation where the feelings are then repressed, what we are essentially doing is denying the feelings from existing.

Repressing and suppressing emotions in our bodies create conflict impairing us to heal. We tend to treat separate events

in our lives as separate issues, but in essence they are all interconnected. For both the caregiver and the person with the injury, these feelings if undealt with may end up causing physical pain in our bodies. If there is pain in your body that has no medical reasoning for it, you may be dealing with repressed or suppressed emotions. It is important for both caregivers and the person with the injury to find a safe place to learn about these layers of feelings and deal with them as they come up. Doing so will also help treat Emotional Lability or Emotional Deficits in stroke survivors or persons who sustained a brain injury caused by other reasons.

If you are feeling like you are on an emotional roller coaster ride, Qigong is the best therapy for balancing these emotions.

QiGong and emotions

I had been successful in allowing the buried emotions to resurface and letting them go. The techniques in these classes allows you to do so in a safe environment without having to discuss or disclose the issues to others. But mainly, I no longer feel like I'm riding the emotional roller coaster. On the contrary, things over all seem more balanced and stabilized throughout the days.

Anosognosia

Anosognosia is a medical term that describes one's inability to see their disability. For me this was significant because throughout my injury I really had no idea the extent of my disability and how it would impact me when attempting to do things that I once did with ease. Despite doctors telling me that I had many limitations, I could not see them. I thought I was fine.

Anosognosia is different from denial in the sense that when you are in denial, you know you are now limited but you don't want to admit it. Anosognosia is when you don't know there is something wrong until you do something and fall flat on your face. For example: I considered myself once to be a very athletic person. I jogged, went to the gym, I did downhill skiing, horseback riding and skating. After my aneurysm when I tried to engage in some of these activities I would only find out when doing them, that I could no longer do them like I once did, even though I have no physical impairments, I attempted to go skating on



the canal. I put my skates on, and decided I was going to skate. The attempt to skate was so bad that I could barely do 0.25km before I landed on my butt with a fracture to my cocci (tailbone). I was in shock, not only from the physical pain, but from the newfound knowledge that I couldn't remember how to skate.

This wasn't just about a lack of practice. I could not remember how to put one foot in front of the other on skates and the body wasn't following the mind and vice versa. Coming from someone who could jump on her skates, twirl endlessly in circles and dance on skates to music, I could barely get one foot in front of the other without losing my balance. Basically, anosognosia is not knowing what you no longer know. In a vain attempt to salvage my pride, I forced myself to finish the 1km mark. The problem was, I now had to skate back to where I started if I wanted go back home.

Anosognosia & QiGong

Because qigong helps me to remain calm, accepting of all things that come my way, accepting the things I can no longer do, and be patient with the re-learning of all things, I can move forward with confidence instead of with frustration, anxiety and loneliness wherever my journey takes me. This self-awareness is most beneficial when attempting to do things I once thought I could do and tackle them with a newfound desire to relearn them.

QiGong and Visual Memory Deficits

Simple physical exercises helps increase blood flow to the brain and helps the relearning processes by making sure the brain stays alert. Basic exercises that involve crossing the arms one over the other for instance is a simple exercise that utilizes both sides of the brain. Cross lateral movements such as when a baby crawls, works both sides of the brain in a balanced way. In qigong there are some cross lateral movements that are beneficial to an injured brain. Pediatric therapy uses such movements to help children with learning disabilities.

It certainly helps to have a good instructor. Philip's method of teaching using mirror image was less confusing. I didn't have to interpret which side or direction my body needed to be in.

Qigong certainly exercises that part of the brain. Simply watching people such as your instructor doing qigong, visualizing it in your brain and trying your best to mimic the motions will help with visual memory processing. We use it all the time: reading, writing, recognizing people, names, places etc...

Visual Memory Processing

Visual memory processing is a very difficult thing to rehabilitate. Visual memory processing is the ability to distinguish and recognize visual images and retain them in your memory. The Benton Visual Retention Test in neuropsychology departments is used to test visual memory. In such tests you may have been given several picture symbols to look at for several seconds and then from memory draw what you saw, or identify which symbols you saw. This would test for any visual memory impairments.

“Visual memory processing is a very difficult thing to rehabilitate.”

Not very many therapists can teach how to rehabilitate an issue with visual memory processing. While they are quite skilled in testing you for it, they do not all know how to teach it or repair it. I knew this was a very important part of learning for children at an elementary school level, as they need this to learn spelling, shapes, sizes and helps with retaining information for quizzes, tests and exams. With children, I was able to see if they

had a visual memory processing difficulty. By catching it early on, we could do activities that were specifically geared to improving visual memory processing to help with reading for instance. Luckily for me, because of this experience, I was able to train myself with visual memory processing activities to strengthen my own deficits after the injury.

In closing

BRAIN INJURY REHABILITATION IS A LIFE LONG JOURNEY. THERE IS NO CURE FOR IT. YOU NEVER GET OVER IT. BUT THERE IS HOPE IN KNOWING THAT THERE ARE TRAINING TOOLS AND EXERCISES TO HELP YOU GET THROUGH IT. AS WITH ANYTHING IN LIFE, IT REQUIRES CONSISTENT AND PERSISTENT STEPS TOWARDS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ANY GOAL. IF YOU WANT TO LOSE WEIGHT, THE COMMITMENT DOESN'T END ONCE YOU TRIED A DIET PLAN FOR A MONTH. THE COMMITMENT REQUIRES A LIFE TIME CHANGE OF EATING HABITS, PHYSICAL EXERCISE AND THOUGHTS ON A DAILY BASIS. BRAIN INJURY REHABILITATION IS NO DIFFERENT. THE WORST CASE SCENARIO IN PRACTICING QIGONG, IS YOU WILL FEEL HAPPIER, PEACEFUL, GROUNDED, CENTERED, GRATEFUL, HOPEFUL, AND MORE SELF-CONFIDENT.

In practicing qigong,
...you will feel happier,
peaceful, grounded,
centered, grateful,
hopeful, and more
self-confident

