



# **Martial Arts: The possible benefit that can be obtained during a period of lockdown. Single case study using diary entries and photographs to tell a story**

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## **Abstract**

The following thought piece follows one individuals' experience of being in lockdown in the United Kingdom and how the practice of martial arts assisted in this experience. Through the use of diary entries, their feelings and thoughts are expressed and how the bad ones of these are assisted through the practice and ability to focus on something other. There is a discussion that draws on other academic and authors perspectives, that evidence and support the thought pieces viewpoint. The piece concludes that practicing martial arts can help individuals through enabling them to have a focus and outlet to help cope with deeper emotional states caused by a situation such as lockdown.

Keywords: mental health, martial arts, lockdown.

## **Introduction**

Martial arts are a popular pastime that individuals can use for physical activity, recreation and sport, with high numbers of both amateur and professional practitioners in the United Kingdom (UK). Martial arts include, but not exclusively, Karate, Taekwondo, Judo and Kung Fu. Dependent on how they are defined, martial arts, can also include weapons based combat systems, for example Kendo and numerous other activities such as health based physical activities, Tai Chi or Chi Gung (Spring, 2015; Buckler 2016). Increasing participation amongst older children and adults alike has been recorded since 2010, the number of adults participating twice a week being over 232,000 (Statistita, 2019). During lockdown the UK Government has encouraged continued physical activity, outdoor based, whilst at the same time preventing clubs, such as martial arts ones, from operating in their usual manner. Though many clubs have offered

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online training, this does not suit everyone and, individuals with mental health issues may avoid what might be difficult interactive situations such as these. It has also been observed through online forums and facebook meetings which the authors has attended, many of the instructors and club proprietors identify that social impacts amongst their student population have been apparent. A connectedness to the club is part of many of the students' wellbeing, they miss the regularity of class and the bonds of friendship that have been formed, they miss an environment that they class as theirs. Competitive athletes also miss the regularity of competition and another layer to the online world is that of online martial arts competitions, which the author has helped organize and run. The above outlines what will be an informal, single case study and thought piece on the occurrences for a martial arts practitioner with specific mental health issues, using their diary to highlight concerns and feelings at the time of entry. It will highlight some of the practices that coaches, and martial arts club practitioners used to overcome the uncertainty created through the Covid-19 lockdown and the impacts on mental health of being restricted and then engaged in activity. It is supported by the author using sources from academic studies that support why martial arts might be particularly helpful at this time.

'Dear diary,

A bit about me. My name is Charlie Tustin Spring, I am 23 and I suffer from severe mental health issues which make me incapable to work or have a normal life. I have Asperger's, ADHD, Depression and Anxiety, along with EUPD (emotionally unstable personality disorder). I also have been diagnosed as having dyslexia, dyspraxia and fibromyalgia which is just the icing on the cake making my life a little shit. I hallucinate every day, I see things all the time and I also hear voices telling me to do things or say things and they can get quite dangerous; not just to me but to other people. Trying to cope with all of this on a day-to-day basis is just near impossible so I must take it hour to hour because I never know when my head is going to switch and cause me to have a freak out episode. A freak out (it's what I call them) are mental episodes where I don't know where I am, I sometimes don't know what year it is let alone what day it is, these episodes can either be me just being confused or me harming myself, I have attempted suicide several times. Once he found out what was going on with me, as I kept it hidden for a long time, before I lived with him for a while, my Dad got me into martial arts to try and help with all of this and it does. Actually, it really does. I have competed for my club and been English and European Champion as well as represented England at the World Championships in America which was very cool, its given me confidence that I never thought I would have back and helped to keep those bad episodes from happening anywhere near as much. As this has been a bad time, for several reasons I have kept a diary of how this has all been for me.'

'Dear diary,



The world has officially gone mad and so have I, Tom (my boyfriend) has had to come home due to being sat next to his friend at his apprenticeship who has now come down with the corona virus (it's a bloody big deal and deadly as hell). I am so worried for him and I don't want Tom to get this, so he is coming home and going to stay with me and we are going to isolate for 14 days and make sure and take every measure the government and the doctors say we must do. Fingers crossed we can get through this. Really not looking forward to it though. Papa (my Dad) has had to close his, well ours, martial arts centre, we only bloody opened it in January. I don't know what we are going to do, its horrible for us as I go down there almost every day, Papa has me teaching some of the kids and it keeps me busy as I can't do any other jobs. This really is bad.'

**Picture 1: Myself, Dad and members winning at the English Championship (2019) for Team Ronin Budo**



Note: We have permission from all the individuals on the photograph to use the image.

'Dear diary,

It has been a full week of being stuck in my tiny little home that I house share with 4 other people, shared kitchens (thank god there's two), shared washing machine and my tiny bedroom for me, Tom, SpongeBob the tortoise and Xander my rabbit. We are doing okay we are just glad we have the pets to keep us going as they're both so funny. I've had a bit of slip up today and freaked out, Tom got scared and had to try and calm me down it took about an hour before I stopped screaming and crying hysterically and I ended up punching the wall and cutting myself which was not good, but I pulled through in the end. Luckily, I then remember my karate training, get myself outside and do some kata in the garden, its small but just doing some of the moves and focussing really does help calm me down, but I also

realise I am missing training. Not just the training I also miss the club and being around other people and going to competitions.'

'Dear diary,

We're allowed back out finally but we can't go anywhere or do anything because of lockdown, everyone must follow social distancing and wear masks and hand sanitise all the time (especially not good for me as I bite my fingers a lot due to the anxiety, so the hand sanitiser burns). Me and Tom got into an argument today, but it didn't last long but one good thing that happens when I get angry I can text my Dad and ask him if I can go to dojo and work on the punch bags. As I am a black belt in karate and kickboxing, finally being allowed to go to dojo and train is music to my ears and my head. I'm going to start going down more now so hopefully that'll keep my head screwed on. It isn't just kicking and punching, working on my Kata, I explain kata as being like ballroom dancing, like strictly, they mark you on performance. I use weapons as well for this and that keeps my head busy and helps stop me thinking too much about anything else.'

**Picture 2: Dad getting me focussed on the bag**



**Picture 3: Meditation**



Meditation is important to help get me focused and bring back to normal as well as karate and kickboxing Dad has encouraged me to do the five rights exercises that are linked to yoga and good meditation practice.

‘Dear diary,

Today’s been one hell of a bad day, I decided for myself and Xander’s wellbeing that I will give him up to an animal sanctuary because I can’t give him the life he deserves and it’s not fair on him.

Papa thought it would be a good idea for me to go down and practice with my weapons kata to take my mind off it, it really worked wonders and got my adrenalin pumping but I’ve got to be careful with how much I do otherwise my body will hate me tomorrow. The fibro can cause me pain and getting carried away by doing too much is not helpful. Another good thing is that Papa says we can do one to ones now, that means I can start doing a little bit of teaching again. The teaching is something I like as it takes me out of my comfort zone in a good way. I have to also schedule myself and this is something that also helps with my problems as it gives me something to do.’

‘Dear diary,

I’m so glad my Dad got the dojo when he did (although in some ways bad timing thanks to corona) because whenever I have a bad head day I can always go down and train or do one to one session with the kids and they always cheer me up. During this pandemic we have been faced with, martial arts has saved me, karate and doing kata has kept my mind focused and just being able to leave everything at the front door when I walk in and just train is what’s good for me. Along with painting and poetry and reading Stephen King obviously, I haven’t completely lost my mind like I thought I would. Not to say this craziness has been easy but having those few things to keep me strong has been helpful.’



**Picture 4: Dad and I practicing Kata**



**Picture 5: Working with one of our students**



Working with one of our students. It really helps me working with others as it stops me focusing on negative parts of my life. Dad is always with me helping develop my teaching and being there to supervise.

Note: we have parental permission for this photograph.

## Reflections

What can be observed from the diary is how martial arts can help individuals; in terms of focus, being organised and adding structure. Donohue (2006) emphasises this and how it helps focus on some very positive attributes. The mind can be used to enhance the focus on being well, it gives a focus on strength and flexibility training. For some it can help assessing the mind, body and



spirit connection (Donohue 2006; Webster-Doyle 2003). Masciotra and Monzon (2003) support this idea of focus in some earlier work where they observed the benefits of being able to get into a flow state as developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975). Flow enables an individual to escape for a time into the action that they are undertaking. Kata training is seen as being particularly positive for this. Martial arts as a discipline are based in many cultures and as such have varied spiritual influences upon them (Lowry 2006; Yang 2011; Labbate 2011). Though argued against by some writers, the disciplines such as Karate, Taekwondo, Aikido, Jujitsu and Judo all have significant influence from Buddhism, Confucianism and Shinto. From the idea of bowing into the Dojo or training hall, the deference to superiors in the room, to the grading structure all have influences from aspects of these spiritual areas. This helps in developing some order to an individual, research in America has shown how traditional martial arts such as those mentioned above helps to calm down and assist those with anger management issues, ADHD and other psychological factors (Taylor 2006).

It is clear from the diary entries that martial arts assisted this individual during the period of lockdown. Others do recognise the importance of keeping diaries to aid and inform progress with mental health issues (Runckle, 2020; Watson et al, 2020). Watson et al, (2020) indicate the positive benefits of being able to express yourself in a journal or diary. From this expression the diarist in this thought piece evidences that the physical coupled with the mental expression aided her in through positive action. Indeed, she has gone on to place third in an online world championship. This has enabled a positive outcome from what could have been a very trying time. Through the assessment of the diary entries it does indicate benefits that may be gained from having something other to focus on when in these extreme conditions.

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