

WellSpring

Shall We Dance? A Way to Get People Active

Fancy Footwork: Dancing Your Way to Better Health

ANNA MOUAT, MFA, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF DANCE, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY.

Can you dance your way to better health? This seems to be the case for seniors, according to a 2005 study from McGill University. Researchers found that learning to dance the Argentine tango improved seniors' balance and ability to perform cognitive tasks and reduced their risk of falling. (School of Physical and Occupational Therapy, McGill University, 2005).

The study recruited 30 seniors at risk for frailty and falls (aged 62 to 90) from the Cummings Jewish Senior Centre in Montreal. All had fallen in the past year (and had developed a fear of falling), but were otherwise physically and mentally healthy. The seniors were randomly assigned to either a tango class or a walking group. Each group met for two hours twice a week for 10 weeks.

At the end of the 10 weeks, the balance and motor coordination of the tango group had significantly increased, and the risk of falls was reduced from 50% to 10% (compared to the walking group for whom the risk of falls also decreased but not significantly).

The seniors' ability to do a complex cognitive task while turning in a small space, walking, or standing on one foot, also significantly improved in the tango group, but not in the walking group. However, normal and fast walking speeds increased in both groups.

The researchers concluded that the ability to learn, remember, and carry out complex dance patterns that are both mentally and physically challenging (such as the Argentine tango) significantly reduced the risk of falling and improved and sustained balance confidence, walking speed, and cognition.

The following article by Anne Flynn outlines the many benefits of dance for various populations and how dance can help people stay active. As she points out, we "all might want to look at the ancient practice of dancing for some solutions to the current epidemic of sedentary living... Enjoyment and pleasure help tremendously with adherence to activity, and that's where dance comes into play."

References

School of Physical and Occupational Therapy, McGill University. (2005). *Doing the tango improves the aging brain*. Retrieved December 7, 2006, from www.medicine.mcgill.ca/spot/research.htm.



Alberta



A Dance a Day Keeps the Doctor Away

ANNE FLYNN, BA, MA, PROFESSOR, PROGRAM OF DANCE, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY.

Dance Every Day

Boogaloo at breakfast? Lindy hop at lunch? Twist at tea? What about waltzing through the witching hour? What about daily dancing right in your home where you are most comfortable to be yourself without worrying about “how you look”?

We can easily incorporate dance breaks into our daily lives and will derive all the benefits associated with regular exercise and personal expression (if you dance every day for a total of 30 to 60 minutes in periods of at least 10 minutes each).

Just try it. Put on some of your favourite music, and let yourself move to the music. It's pretty straightforward. You have all the tools you need to connect with the music and dance. You don't need to know any steps, you don't have to have a good sense of rhythm, and you don't have to worry about stepping on anyone's toes, or anyone looking at you on a crowded dance floor.

Dance is just you and the music in a moment in time. It's like a moving meditation about staying present in your body/mind. Just notice how you feel. Did you choose quick music or is it a day for something slower? Do your feet feel like stomping, or do your hips need to swing and sway smoothly? Is your movement choppy or seamless? What does your body/mind need today?

Dance to Feel Good

There are good reasons why certain phrases become common knowledge in any culture. One commonly accepted “truth” is that dance is good for your health and makes you feel happy. Rather than citing research studies (and many exist), I want to rely on our collective common sense and ask you to test for yourself. We do not need others to validate the wellness we feel when we dance to music.

Movement is absolutely fundamental to our existence as human beings. When movement stops, the heart stops beating, and we are no longer alive. It's that simple. It is widely accepted in popular and scientific literature that Canadians are more sedentary now than at any other point

in history. Our health-care system is under increasing pressure to cope with conditions resulting from this inactivity. (Interestingly, the British Government has just decided to provide dance classes through their public health services as part of a plan to prevent a national obesity epidemic (<http://tinyurl.com/yd9t4x>.)

Dance Because You Like It

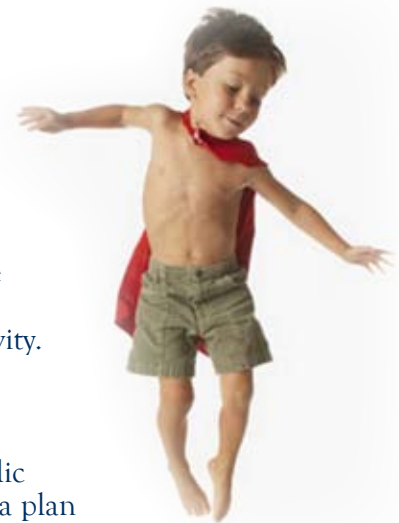
We all might want to look at the ancient practice of dancing for some solutions to the current epidemic of sedentary living. No amount of “shoulds” is going to keep people adhering to their exercise programs. It is a challenge to keep up an activity if you do not enjoy doing the activity. Enjoyment and pleasure help tremendously with adherence to activity, and that's where dance comes into play.

If there is any doubt that dance is one way to a life of enjoyable and satisfying physical activity, let me ask you if you have ever seen a toddler who did not immediately start moving to the rhythm of music? We all start smiling along and are drawn in to the total sweetness of their dances. It might even awaken our own dancing impulses, and we join with them in a sway or a bounce.

As human beings, we are “hard wired” to respond to music, and dancing is that response. Dancing helps us feel how our hearts, minds, and bodies are connected. This wholeness of experience is what makes dance so special.

Dance to Connect with Other Cultures

It is easier to stay active when your family, friends, and culture support you. Dance forms exist in most cultures around the world. For practitioners, dance may provide a bridge to encourage people from diverse cultures to stay active. One of the realities



of living in a culturally pluralistic nation such as Canada is that there is no “national dance form.” There’s no one dance we all know as “Canadians” the way we all know the national anthem. If we were in Cuba, we would most likely know how to rumba. Dance can be a way to build national unity and a sense of the collective.

Canadians dance in all sorts of ways that reflect the diverse make-up of our citizens. Square dance, line dance, ballroom dance, African dance, belly dance, Dragon dance, ballet, tap, and hip-hop are all part of the Canadian “mosaic.” When there is no common spoken language among members of a group, dance can provide a way for people to share common experiences.

Dance to Improve Your Mental Health

Dance helps in so many ways, e.g., balance, strength, flexibility, memorization, social skills, knowledge of other cultures, musical attunement, and, perhaps most importantly, a positive feeling of accomplishment and overall well being. This positive outlook comes from dance’s ability to draw our attention to our wholeness not our fragmentedness.

When all parts of ourselves work in harmony to produce coordinated dance movement and we are flowing with the music, we are able to settle in to the moment by moment experience of dancing in a human body. That connection with the present moment nourishes us in many ways.

Dancing is a gateway to our feelings as well as to our physiology and anatomy. When we experience

“As human beings we are 'hard wired' to respond to music, and dancing is that response. Dancing helps us feel how our hearts, minds, and bodies are connected. This wholeness of experience is what makes dance so special.”

ourselves as whole (as in dancing where all parts coordinate—heart and mind, hands and feet), we are better able to manage our day-to-day lives. Dance helps tremendously with our mental outlook on life. It can connect us to others or help us to express our own very personal journeys.

For the past few years, I have helped to facilitate a program at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre called “Healing through the Arts: Making Meaning of Cancer.” The arts, including dance, are a way to help us digest our emotional experiences. The arts are the “teeth” we need to chew on all the emotions that we negotiate during our lives. Every time I work in the studio with the cancer program participants I am reminded that that we cannot control the unwelcome experiences that life brings our way, but we can choose how to respond to these circumstances. Dance is one very good way to manage difficult circumstances.

Dance All Your Life

I was the content specialist some years ago on an advocacy video about the lifelong value of dance. The video covered everything from toddlers to the elderly and summarized the research about the benefits of dance programs (University of Calgary, Communications Media, 1998). I also helped to create a dance program for older adults in which most participants were in their early 70s (with instructors who were university dance majors in their 20s). The multi-cultural participants beamed with pleasure during their dance classes, because they understood that still being able to dance is a gift. The sense of well being that comes from dancing is like vitamins for the spirit.

I suggest that we take our cue from the wisdom of these “elders” to start dancing in our kitchens and family rooms as one approach to healthy living, both as individuals and communities. Cha-cha anyone?

More Information

- Alberta Dance Alliance (ADA). The Alliance keeps a database (with over 1,700 entries) of dance activities throughout the province. You can access this information by phoning 1-888-422-8107 or e-mailing the Alliance at dance@oanet.com-ab. (www.abdancealliance.ab.ca/links)

Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of Albertans through physical activity.

- Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance. The CAHPERD website has extensive member resources and an online bookstore. (www.cahperd.ca/eng/dance/dance_resources.cfm)
- Human Kinetics. This US publisher has many instructional videos on dance. (www.humankinetics.com)
- National Arts Centre. The Centre launched a great website last year with all kinds of information about dance. (www.artsalive.ca/en/dan)
- National Dance Education Organization (US). This group has an online bookstore with extensive resources. (www.ndeo.org)
- Public libraries. Your local public library will likely also have some dance resources.
- University of Alberta Dance Club. The Club's website includes information about where to dance in Edmonton. (www.uadc.ca)
- University of Calgary Library. The U of C library has a large collection of dance books, periodicals, and videos. The literature on dance is very broad, from how-to books and manuals to the history of particular dance forms. If you apply for a free Alberta library card through your local public library, you can take out five books or other materials from the U of C library. (<http://library.ucalgary.ca>)
- University of Calgary Program of Dance. This Program includes faculty websites with links to several national and international organizations. (<http://dance.ffa.ucalgary.ca>)

References

University of Calgary, Communications Media (Producer). (1998). *Dance: For our children* [Video]. (No longer available for sale.)

WELLSPRING EDITORIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Claudia Emes, University of Calgary
Zakk Morrison, Be Fit for Life, Medicine Hat
Dela Royan, Aspen Regional Health Authority
John Valentine, Grant MacEwan College
Judy Newman and Kathy Garnsworthy, Alberta Centre for Active Living

IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

Alberta Centre for Active Living
Percy Page Centre
3rd Floor, 11759 Groat Road
Edmonton, AB T5M 3K6
Phone: 780.427.6949 or
1.800.661.4551 (toll-free in Alberta)
Fax: 780.455.2092
Web site: www.centre4activeliving.ca
E-mail: active.living@ualberta.ca

STAFF

Director: Judith Down
Researchers: Ron Plotnikoff, PhD,
Tanya Berry, PhD, Jenny Burgess, MA
Education Coordinator: Judy Newman
Older Adult Coordinator: Jennifer
Dechaine
Communications and Marketing
Coordinator: Kathy Garnsworthy
Communications Specialist: Janice
Robinson
Resource Coordinator: Rosanne
Prinsen
Financial Administrator: Carol Knull
Administrative Assistant: Margaret
Burns
Centre Assistant: Lynda Matthews-
Mackey
Canadian Health Network: Pauline
Poon, Maria Tan, Sally Press
Health in Action Project: Karena Apps
Eccles, Gwen Farnsworth

WellSpring is published six times/year.
ISSN 1187-7472

The Alberta Centre for Active Living is the
CHN Active Living Affiliate.

www.canadian-health-network.ca

Alberta
Centre for
Active Living

Research and education for the promotion of physical activity