



The Healing Powers of Dance

Dancing is more than fun — it's therapeutic

by Christina Lanzito, [AARP The Magazine \(/magazine/\)](#) |  Comments: 22



ALLEN BIRNBACH/MASTERFILE

Dance can improve balance and flexibility.

Valerie Perdue, 55, was diagnosed at age 42 with Sjögren's syndrome, a chronic autoimmune disease that left her exhausted to the point of immobility and in debilitating pain. "The doctor told me, basically, I wasn't going to get well," says Perdue. Then a friend introduced her to a [modern dance \(/entertainment/arts-leisure/info-06-2010/last-action-hero.html\)](#) class. Although she only had the strength to watch, she "was so emotionally moved by its beauty," she kept going, and eventually was able to participate: First she'd just

breathe deeply, and move her arms while seated, then could stand for longer periods during the class. After many years of dogged practice, Perdue says, "I became physically stronger, mentally clearer. It was so transformative and healing to me."

See also: [Sign up for AARP's Health Newsletter \(http://www.aarp.org/online-community/people/subscribeFromEmail.action?id=19061&intcmp=RR-EMAIL-SUB-HLTH\)](http://www.aarp.org/online-community/people/subscribeFromEmail.action?id=19061&intcmp=RR-EMAIL-SUB-HLTH)

Perdue is a convert to the church of dance – which some people consider a cure for much of what ails us. It may not be the answer to every [health \(/health/\)](/health/) crisis, but there's no doubt that it can benefit the body and mind in many ways.

Some of the physical effects are obvious: dance can – among other things – boost cardiovascular health and [bone strength \(/health/conditions-treatments/info-01-2010/health_discovery_high_impact_sports_best_for_bone_strength.html\)](/health/conditions-treatments/info-01-2010/health_discovery_high_impact_sports_best_for_bone_strength.html) (because it's weight-bearing exercise), as well as improve balance and flexibility. But there's evidence it does much more.

A study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* investigated the effect leisure activities had on the risk of [dementia \(/health/conditions-treatments/info-02-2011/using-language-to-combat-dementia.html\)](/health/conditions-treatments/info-02-2011/using-language-to-combat-dementia.html) in the elderly. Researchers found that frequent dancing was the only physical activity of the 9 studied that appeared to lower the participants' risk of dementia considerably. The lead author of the study, Joe Verghese, a professor of Neurology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, says he's not sure why dancing had such a unique effect, but surmises that, "unlike many other physical activities, dancing also involves significant mental effort and social interactions." Both intellectual and social stimulation have been shown to reduce the risk of getting dementia.

Dance seems to help [Parkinson's \(/health/drugs-supplements/info-03-2011/ibuprofen-may-protect-against-parkinsons-disease.html\)](/health/drugs-supplements/info-03-2011/ibuprofen-may-protect-against-parkinsons-disease.html) patients as well, says Citlali Lopez-Ortiz, a research scientist at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. She volunteers as a dance teacher for a class of Parkinson's patients twice a week. "The focus is on helping them find new ways of moving and to improve the speed at which they move," she says. Lopez-Ortiz introduces slow, ballet-like movements, sometimes taking the class to see the Joffrey Ballet for inspiration. With time, her students often become more mobile, and more confident. (She was thrilled when a student sent her an email telling her that for the first time in two or three years he was able to run for the bus.)

Dance as a curative exercise isn't a new phenomenon. The dance therapy movement was born decades ago when Marian Chace first introduced dance to psychiatric patients at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, DC in the 1940s. She taught a class called "Dance for Communication" to World War II vets, offering them a way to convey feelings that – especially for psychologically traumatized patients – can be difficult to verbalize. Chace eventually helped found the American Dance Therapy Association in 1966.

Dance/movement therapy focuses on dancing's psychological benefits and its ability to encourage emotional connections. Today, dance is used in treatments for everything from [eating disorders \(http://healthtools.aarp.org/learning-center/eating-disorders\)](http://healthtools.aarp.org/learning-center/eating-disorders) to [autism \(http://healthtools.aarp.org/learning-center/autism\)](http://healthtools.aarp.org/learning-center/autism) to [depression \(http://healthtools.aarp.org/learning-center/depression\)](http://healthtools.aarp.org/learning-center/depression).

Christina Devereaux, spokesperson for the American Dance Therapy Association, explains, "We really believe in the body/mind connection, and dance is a way for people to use what's happening inside them and express it in an external, expansive way." She compares it to talk therapy, where patients use discussion

