

So What is the Best Exercise? ...DANCING!

Yes! In my opinion, dancing could very well be the best all-around exercise for the widest number of people. Everyone can do it and all ages can benefit. Dancing will benefit you in so many ways: physiologically, psychologically, and spiritually. Humans have been improving their health by dancing since, well, since there have been humans. Let's take a closer look at the documented health benefits of dancing, shall we.

Let's start with the physical benefits which may be the most obvious. Dancing will elevate your heart rate like walking or running depending on whether you are doing a slower smooth dance such as the Waltz or a faster Latin dance like the Cha-cha or Salsa. Dancing will improve your cardio conditioning, breathing capacity and the circulation to your legs. This will keep your blood pressure and cholesterol at a healthy level and lower your chances of getting diabetes or peripheral vascular disease as you get older. This type of aerobic exercise also boosts the immune system to help fight off viruses, infections and even cancer. Physical activity such as dance has been shown to help you sleep better as well, which is important for all aspects of health and well being.

The physical movements of dance: reaching, bending, stepping and turning are all excellent ways to improve joint health. Synovial fluid is released into the joints only with movement. That's why when you are still for extended periods, it feels so good to move and get a little squirt of synovial fluid lubrication. This will increase your range of motion and make activities of daily living easier. Pushing, pulling, holding and bending activities all require activation of the muscles against some resistance that make them all valuable strengthening activities. As you move from step to step, you will be balancing and turning on one foot which will stimulate the proprioceptors in your feet and ankles. This will not only improve your balance for dancing, but other activities as well. Proprioceptors provide your nervous system with feedback on where your body is in space and their functioning is essential for good balance.

Many dances such as ballroom dancing and ballet are great for your posture. Contracting your postural muscles while using correct dance technique is a great way to counteract the time spent sitting in front of a computer that so many jobs have become these days. For good posture, strong abdominals are essential. Dancing is also a great way to strengthen your core, especially dances that require a lot of hip motion such as Belly Dancing, Cha Cha and Samba. Try any of those for 30-60 minutes and you will feel what I mean! Have you ever seen a professional dancer with out great abs? Me neither!

And speaking of moving you hips for an hour, now you're burning calories and lots of them. Dancing is a fabulous way to look fabulous. Why do you think weight loss dance videos are so popular? They are fun and they work if you work it out.

'WOW!' you say? Dance is really that good for me? Yes it is, but wait there's more, much more. Now let's look at the psychological, cognitive and emotional benefits of

dancing. Increasing blood flow to the brain is a good thing for most everyone, agreed? Good! Remembering the steps to different dances stimulates the brain and will improve all aspects of cognitive functioning. Many people worry about fading memory as we age, but dancing is a great way to improve it. Think of it as a more fun Sudoku with your favorite music. Learning new steps and terminology creates new synapses in the brain that will keep your brain functioning at optimal levels for years to come.

Speaking of fun, dancing is also a great way to relieve stress. The physical aspects of dance mentioned earlier help you “blow off steam” like many sports do, while the fun and social aspects decrease your cortisol levels. Cortisol is the “stress hormone” that can wreak havoc on all aspects of your well being. Another way it helps decrease stress is by its meditative effects. When you dance, you are focusing on one thing and one thing only, the dance at hand (or feet really). I defy anyone to dance to their favorite song and think of the crappy day you had at work at the same time...IMPOSSIBLE! This effect is enhanced even more when dancing with a partner. Whether just an acquaintance, a good friend or someone you deeply care about, this kind of human touch is crucial for long term health and well being. Many studies on kids (all ages, from preemies to teens) have shown that when deprived of human touch, they “fail to thrive.” And as we get older, this type of touch and one-on-one interaction has been shown to decrease incidence of depression. So if you’re not married or in a long term relationship, at least find a good dance partner! Trade your Prozac, Elavil and Cymbalta for dance shoes and literally dance you troubles away.

Dancing will increase your “happy place.” Now I don’t have any scientific data on your “happy place” but I believe that the first dance steps ever taken erupted spontaneously out of some joy or happiness. As time went on these dance movements were accompanied by music and incorporated into festivals and praise rituals because they associated dance with joy. And it’s true, dance *is* joy! From the dawn of human history, we have danced and reaped the health benefits all along the way (for evidence Google cave art and dance.) They didn’t know why, they just knew it felt good. Now we know why it feels good, so don’t fight it. And don’t say “I can’t dance.” Everyone can and has danced sometime. Whether a choreographed routine, a spontaneous tapping of the foot or a rhythmic nodding of the head, you can! Just do it, let go, you know it feels good. If you can manage to “dance like nobody’s watching,” you will live longer, while being healthier and happier along the way. See you on the dance floor!

By:

Kenneth S. Dill PT
Director of Physical Therapy
Physiotherapy Associates

