



Why more older people should give dancing a whirl

There's a growing interest in the power of dance to improve physical and mental wellbeing in later years

Hannah Fearn

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Muhammad Yusuf was a good dancer as a young man. He drew in women with his fine footwork, he says. Now the 75-year-old Somali takes part in a dance class for older men to keep fit. "I'm old and I can't move like that anymore. I have heart problems and leg problems, but it has helped."

His weekly exercise group is run by the Green Candle Dance Company at Mayfield House, a day centre for older Somali people in Tower Hamlets in London. The class, funded by the local clinical commissioning group (CCG), reflects a growing interest in the power of dance to improve health in later years.

A conference organised by the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) in London in April brought big names from the world of dance together with ageing experts to discuss how to get older people interested in the benefits of dancing.

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Susan Venn, co-director of the Centre for Research on Ageing at Surrey University, says it's not just the benefit of physical movement that improves health and wellbeing for older dancers.

"There's quite a lot of research that show that the social dimension is almost as important as the physical dimension. Engagement with others in the community has as many health benefits in terms of mental wellbeing as the physical benefits of keeping moving in later life."

Though there's evidence of its value, encouraging people to get involved with dance may be more difficult - especially when it comes to men.

"[Dance] is most commonly associated with older women, and I think there's a bit of a trick missed in terms of older men, who are often more isolated anyway. Sometimes older men need a lot of encouragement to get out," says Venn.

But tutors working with the group of Somali men found creative ways to spark their interest. The group are largely retired seamen who trained on the boats that linked Britain to its colonial outpost. To a backdrop of traditional Arabic music and British sea shanties, they attempt circle dance in which the movements mimic their former work: rowing, lifting, pulling ropes to hoist a sail.

Ibrahim Abdullah, 81, suffers from a heart condition and wears a pacemaker but still takes part, albeit from his seat. He's not shy about getting involved: "When we were younger we used to work together. We all know each other here," he says.

Fergus Early, Green Candle's artistic director, says the charity's work with older people demonstrates that dance is also good for preventing other conditions such as dementia. "What's interesting about dance is that its demands and its effects are both mentally stimulating," he says. "People don't appreciate what a cerebral exercise it is: there's memory, there's decision making. We have lots of anecdotal evidence of that."

Green Candle will report back to the CCG with its findings at the end of the summer, and Early hopes that a longer series of sessions will be funded as part of its spending on public health and wellbeing.

Another series of pilot groups, funded by the RAD, worked with 112 older people across London. It had two aims: to reach out to pensioners in the community, and to share best practice in teaching dance to older people. The sessions included tap dancing, musical theatre and jazz dance.

"There was a sense of enjoyment, of social engagement and of reconnecting with creativity," says Vicky Watts, an academic at the RAD. "They all came away feeling so inspired because it's joyful."

Elaine Giles, 54, suffers some short-term memory problems and took part in an RAD-funded class. "Props such as long scarves, top hats and flamenco skirts were available which encouraged people to learn different styles and act out different roles," she explains.

"My memory problems were shared by many of the group, so I was less anxious than in my usual work setting about forgetting important information. One task, mirroring each other, did not require memory which made it easier to relax as a result. Most tasks needed lots of repetition."

Most dancers in the pilots reported physical, mental and emotional gains in just six weeks, and Watts says they found a new "finesse" in motor skills.

But despite the overwhelming evidence that dance is beneficial to health and wellbeing in later years, cuts to the arts sector means few groups will find public funding.

"Even doctors are struggling to find the resources to help," says Venn. "The answer must come from older people themselves, or from inter-generational groups. Perhaps younger people could be encouraged to accept older people into their groups ... [for] older and younger people to work together."

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