



The healing power of dance

Dancing is a wonderful expression of ourselves - and has been scientifically proven to be a therapeutic method as well as being fun.

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"No, I'd rather not. I can't dance." You've probably heard this sentence on the edge of a dance floor, from friends, from your partner or even from yourself. But that's not actually true. Most people have rhythm in their blood from birth, it's even in their genes. We just unlearn it as we grow up. Shame and insecurity add to this. Cultural imprinting also plays a major role here. While it is considered uncool in Latin America, for example, not to be able to dance, we Central Europeans lack confidence in our physicality. We are often too performance-oriented, too rigid and hesitant instead of spontaneous and expressive.

to simply start dancing. But it's not really that difficult.

Movement that comes from within

Dancing has many faces: it can be a simple bobbing along to music, a sweat-inducing sport like Zumba, a couple's dance like the waltz or a highly complex art form like classical ballet. It is always an expression of feelings, without any goal or ulterior motive. This makes dance a special kind of movement that comes from within, says Dr. Julia F. Christensen. The former ballet dancer is now a

She is a sought-after neuroscientist at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics in Frankfurt/Main, whose focus is on dance and its effects on health.

Her latest finding from one of her current research projects: Professional dance means too much competition, stress, exam pressure or perfection on stage, so dancing tends to have a negative effect. In contrast, the masses, for whom dancing is their hobby, live a very healthy life. This is because this sport combines four important aspects. Firstly, dancing is considered aerobic exercise, i.e. it trains endurance and reduces fat. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends 180 minutes per week. Of course, it can be sweaty in different ways, just compare an hour of Zumba with an hour of ballroom dancing, but it is always aerobic exercise.

"Dancing without music is unimaginable for most people. The music alone, as a second aspect, has immense power, regulates our hormone balance and synchronizes our body to a beat. Only humans and songbirds have mastered this fine art," explains Christensen.

The social effect as the third component should not be underestimated. Hearing, seeing, touching each other attentively, feeling the presence of the other person: moving in sync with each other in a safe environment supports the immune system and regulatory processes and creates closeness and a sense of belonging.

"The fourth aspect is expression. In other sports, it's usually about scoring goals, running fast or outwitting your opponent, which often reinforces aggression. Dancing is different: whether it's an aggro song or a happy song, you dance your feelings out of yourself without pursuing a goal. Stress hormones are reduced and blood pressure drops," says the neuroscientist.

Get started with instructions

Dancing alone at home through the kitchen or taking part in an online dance class - this also has a positive effect, but lacks the social component. This, on the other hand, is

Club is a given. Nevertheless, Christensen advises taking a professionally supervised course. "You increase your own possibilities in your love dance if you learn it properly under guidance. However, this should never be done doggedly, but always with joy. The brain loves to learn, but it needs time. Only when you repeat movements and figures over and over again does your brain store them as an automatism and internalize them. Now you no longer think about every step or about everyday things,

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Dancing has always been deeply rooted in all cultures around the world. Dance therapy has been around since the beginning of the 19th century. The number of studies proving the positive influence of dance on body and soul is constantly growing. Nevertheless, further intensive research is needed in order to gain even greater awareness and recognition in the health sector.

Therapist Brigitte Züger has also observed that people with complaints or specific issues are showing an increased interest in dance therapy. People want to involve the body much more in the process of personal development.



You just dance. You get into a flow, dance your feelings, abandon yourself to the music and the movement. Our body then speaks, so to speak, salsa, tango or swing," says Christensen.

Ideal full body workout

Dancing is an effective full-body workout, as the neuroscientist demonstrates with numerous examples. The sometimes fast rhythmic movements accelerate your pulse, breathing and heartbeat and therefore increase your stamina. However, the exertion can be well dosed. According to cardiologists, regular dancing every week is one of the most effective ways to strengthen the heart. Even if you already have heart disease, dancing can be a healthy rehabilitation sport. Exercise makes the heart more efficient and improves blood circulation in the long term.

Dancing is also abdominal-leg-buttock training and supports the back, because it requires posture. Over time, you will find it easier to adopt a more upright posture in everyday life because a variety of muscles, ligaments and tendons stabilize the spine. In general, (hobby) dancing is good for all joints. The combination of different movements at the same time trains coordination, balance and body awareness and also challenges our brain. It doesn't work without concentration and thinking. The muscles are strengthened in their natural movement,

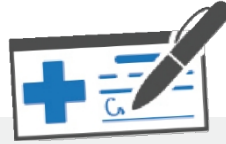
in contrast to the often one-sided muscle training on fitness equipment. Fasciae remain supple, blood flow to the ligaments and tendons is increased and mobility is improved. A study at Oxford University also showed that pain sensitivity was significantly reduced during strenuous exercise and synchronized dancing. This is probably due to an increased endorphin level, which has a pain-relieving effect. In addition to all these positive effects on the body, dancing also helps the soul - through the communal experience and social exchange, according to Dr. Christensen.

Initiating the healing process through dance therapy

In contrast to dancing as a leisure activity, dance therapy aims to initiate a healing process. In clinics, dance therapy is increasingly used in groups, while in private practices it tends to take the form of individual lessons. First, however, an assessment is necessary, as Brigitte Züger, dance therapist with a practice in Basel and director of the Zoe School for Dance Movement Therapy, emphasizes.

"During the interview, we ask about the client's motivation, their goals and their private and professional life situation. We also gather information on family themes, family atmospheres and the nature of relationships in the family of origin. The second part of the assessment basically examines movement behavior, the perception and experience of movement. As an example, I invite the client to walk through the room.





Ta4ztherapie from the doctor

Dance therapy can be prescribed by a doctor. In Switzerland, it is billed via complementary therapy. If you have this insurance, you can go to a dance therapist with a federal diploma. The costs are covered between 60 and 90 percent. According to therapist Brigitte Züger, the Swiss model is unique in the world.

to walk. They themselves determine the speed, the size of the steps, the direction and the arm movement. For us, dance is not primarily the movement with prescribed steps and forms, but the experienced movement in time, rhythm and space. Every 'free' movement expresses a mood, an expression or the mental state of the personality. An important part of our work is to understand this systematically and derive interventions from it, which then lead to a therapeutic process. We use music very carefully in this process. It can promote the flow of movement and the experience of movement, but it can also be very distracting. That's why we often move without music, which many people find pleasant. Nothing extraneous disturbs us, it allows for a lot of peace and quiet."

Effect on the psyche

Dance therapy promotes self-awareness and thus self-competence, emotional and self-regulation. For example, it is used to treat de-pressive illnesses, chronic pain, eating disorders, psychosomatic illnesses, stress and burnout, neurological illnesses or grief-related experiences. This is shown, among other things, by a study from 2022, which was carried out in the field of dance and movement therapy at the Faculty of Therapy Sciences at SRH University Heidelberg. It provides new insights into dance therapy for people with severe physical illnesses: This form of therapy has a positive effect on body awareness, stress levels and the well-being of people with heart and lung diseases as well as Long Covid.

"The Power of Dance", a master's thesis from 2021 on current and possible future applications of dance as a therapy method at the University of Graz, also comes to a positive conclusion. Brigitte Züger also confirms these effects with two examples from her practice: "With people in a state of burnout, I often observe that they don't know where their limits lie. They also tend to overestimate performance and underestimate their own needs in their biographies.

tions. In dance therapy, we therefore deal with topics such as the appropriate use of strength, the balance between exertion and recovery and the examination of self-perception versus performance."

Dance therapy after a stroke pursues a completely different goal: here, the therapists basically strive to develop the ability to deal with the impairments in body tone, control and controllability of movement. For example, the still intact side of the body is used to relieve the impaired side in order to avoid overloading. The process of accepting the paralyzed side as part of one's own self and feeling "whole" together with it is also encouraged. In severe cases, attempts are made to create a low-threshold sense of belonging in the group.

Whether as therapy or as a hobby, dance has so many positive effects. With one very special characteristic: you can express yourself, your feelings and experiences, which would sometimes be difficult to do in words. Dancing is simply very good medicine. ●



Book tip:

"Dancing is the best medicine" by Julia F. Christensen and Dong-Seon Chang, Rowohlt Verlag, 2018

