

What Dance Can Do For You: Therapeutic Self-Improvement

by Kerri Krueger | March 2008



The essence of dance is inside all of us, young or old, married or single. Dance can mean different things to different people. To some, the activity can be a form of liberating self-expression, while to others, it is simply a way to get out and meet new people. Still, to others, dance is a creative outlet, a form of stress relief and relaxation, and also a form of exercise and weight loss.

The art of dance does not discriminate and knows no bounds. Everyone—students, business professionals, senior citizens, married couples and yes, even you—can find a fitting dance style. If you've been searching for a new form of self-improvement, look no further. In more ways than you know, dancing can be the ticket to a new you.

A Natural Form of Exercise for Body and Mind

In today's health-conscious society, people are looking to dance for a new form of fitness. The bodily benefits are two-fold. Dancing contributes to good posture and body alignment. For many people, dancing is an opportunity to look good and paint an attractive picture of themselves. Since many styles of dancing are partnerships, good posture paves the way for smoother dance movements.

Energetic forms of dancing can give the body a great workout. It is more pleasurable than walking because it uses the entire body. Numerous muscle groups are worked, encouraging gentle stretching which increases flexibility and stamina over time. The capacity of the cardiovascular system will be increased, along with heart rate. The side-to-side movements in dance sequences contribute to the strength of weight-bearing bones such as the tibia, fibula, and the femur, and help to prevent bone loss.

Dancing can be used as a supplement to a current workout routine or as a complete replacement for it. In either case, you can get exactly what you want out of dance. You can set your own pace, performing with high or low energy, depending on how you feel. Dancing also allows for muscle toning rather than bulk.

Any style of dance exercises the mind as well as the body. After memorizing dance movements, they can be performed without even thinking about them. The mind also receives a workout because, many times, the same

routines are not used each time you dance. "Remembering the steps and combinations and keeping the beat, together with the physical movements, is a great mind-body workout," says Christine Almeida, founder and instructor of the Latin Dance Company in Brookfield, Wisconsin.

A New Road to Weight Loss

Dancing is highly aerobic, there's no doubt about that. A continuous 30-40 minute workout will help increase metabolism and can burn anywhere from 200-400 calories.

Be sure to choose a style of dance that interests you. Deciding on a dance style that you won't stick to will not benefit you. Do a bit of research and make sure you understand the benefits of the dance style you've chosen. Styles like salsa and hip-hop are more active, whereas jazz and ballroom dancing are slower. All dance genres will burn calories, but some will burn more than others, so you may want to base your decision on how committed you are to losing weight.

Mixing dance styles during workouts will work more muscle groups than a single style would. Combining dance with regular fitness routines will help maximize the amount of weight lost. If increasing flexibility is an interest, try mixing dance with stretching exercises like yoga or pilates.

Belly dancing, which celebrates the female form, is considered to be one of the best dance genres for weight loss. The whole body is exercised, including the hips, thighs, knees, and even pelvic muscles. Back muscles are slowly worked, minimizing lower back pain. "Dancing has taught me to be able to control movements in my body with more awareness than most women my age," says Allysia Loebel, an 18-year old belly-dancing student. "It also tones up a body because you learn to isolate and work specific muscles in the body. Trust me when I say you DO have hip muscles!" If you're interested in belly dancing and weight loss is a priority, choose a class that includes constant movement.

"Belly dancing definitely tones muscles," says Jennifer Johnson, a 31-year old theatre major and head of the belly dancing club at UW-Milwaukee. "There is stopping and starting that get your heart rate going. It's a great for cardio weight loss. Dancing outside of a class, you'll definitely see weight loss too."

Relax and Socialize

Whether you're having a bad week at work or are feeling stressed for other reasons, you can find relief on the dance floor. The physical exertion of dancing, along with the live atmosphere, creates one of the best-known ways to relieve stress. The dance floor can provide a temporary escape from normal routines, even if only for a short time.

According to a study done by Dr. Tiffany Field at the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami Medical School, "Human contact through dance can lower the body's production of cortisol, a stress hormone. Lowering these stress hormones allows you to feel more relaxed."

Hands down, dancing is the best way to relieve stress and meet new people. "When dancing with a partner, you share a common interest," says Christine Almeida. "That in itself makes it easier to become friends."

Since dance is a form of self-expression, it is also one of the easiest ways to relieve stress. You are aware of what your body is doing and how it is moving.

"Belly dancing has shown me that you can be any shape, any size, and any color, and still be beautiful on the outside. It is a way for me to show that I know my body and can manipulate it to make myself look beautiful," says Loebel. "I love to dance and belly dance is the one place where taking the shimmy down a notch is not going to be a good thing."

Many styles of dancing can even put you back in touch with your ethnic heritage. African dancing, temple dancing, and belly dancing, as well as salsa and flamenco, are just a few styles that accomplish this. "Salsa dancing has brought me back in touch with my Hispanic roots. I used to have very few Hispanic friends," says Almeida. "Today, most of my friends are Hispanic. My circle of friends grew tremendously. Salsa dancing has opened my world in a way that no other genre could."

A Relationship Spice

Couple dancing, regardless of genre, is a very personal act. In some cases, the woman must willingly submit to

the lead of her partner, and he must guide her through the steps. Dancing is a great way for a couple to learn to work together and can ultimately bring them closer together. Communication occurs through bodily touch, allowing the couple to express love without saying anything. The slower dance genres also allow eye-to-eye contact.

“A married couple called me not long ago,” says Almeida of a couple whom are registered with her dance company. “He is a ‘street’ dancer and she is trained in ballroom. They have wonderful chemistry and are beautiful to watch on the dance floor. ‘We need to dance,’ the husband said. ‘We not been dancing and it is good for us and our marriage.’ My thought is that couples who dance together, stay together.”

Before Beginning to Dance...

- Stretch thoroughly before beginning any type of dance routine.
- Drink plenty of water while dancing.
- Be careful not to “overdo” it—injuries can occur in the knees, ankles, and hop joints.
- When deciding on a dance style, be realistic about your fitness levels and your ability. Choosing an unsuitable dance style can also lead to injuries.
- Check with your doctor before beginning a dance routine and make sure you are healthy enough to begin dance in the first place.

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