

# Dancing Is Good for Your Brain



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Exercise can benefit an aging brain. It can improve cognition and delay dementia, increase attention and focus, and reduce depression, research suggests. But if you'd rather shake your booty than run a marathon, get excited. Dancing offers enormous benefits for your body and brain, from relieving stress to increasing social connections and reducing loneliness, according to a new report on music from AARP's Global Council on Brain Health (GCBH).

"Moving to music requires coordination of varied neural activities, involving the brain's reward center, along with sensory and motor circuits," the report states. "All that synchronizing enriches the experience and increases the pleasure. This coupling not only feels good but is good — for the brain."

The type of dance you choose may be irrelevant. Line dancing may protect brain tissue, and ballroom dancing may improve spatial analysis (the part of the brain focused on navigation and remembering layouts), studies show. Latin dances, such as the salsa and merengue, may boost visual recognition and decision-making, among other skills, the GCBH report states. And whether it's the tango or the twist, dance provides both mental and social stimulation, which may enhance memory. In a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign study, researchers followed a group of healthy seniors (ages 60 to 79) for six months in four different classes: dance, walking, walking and nutrition, and stretching and toning. Only those in the dance class exhibited improvement in the brain's fornix, a collection of nerve fibers that play an important role in memory.

Dancing may even reduce the risk of dementia, a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found, and it can provide benefits that other forms of exercise don't, such as improving balance. Unlike other types of workouts and stretching routines, dance involves constantly changing rhythms, speeds, steps and arm patterns. You're not using the same repetitive motion, as with exercises like cycling, swimming and walking. In a recent 18-month study out of Germany, one group of seniors did endurance exercises and another group danced. Both groups showed improvement in the hippocampus region of the brain (a key area for memory and cognition), but the dancers also improved their balance.

Lisa Morgan, an instructor of dance pedagogy at Colorado State University, has witnessed this firsthand while teaching her Moving Through Parkinson's class. Dance classes not only offer the psychosocial benefits of touch, community and creative expression, but patterned movements paired with live music challenge dancers' sense of timing and space, which can specifically improve balance for some people, Morgan says. She also develops movement patterns based on familiar experiences, such as living in a Colorado environment. "We might work on spatial awareness, transfer of weight and fall prevention by imagining we are birds expanding our wingspans, soaring through a canyon and landing with solid footing," she explains. Mental imagery during dance, or meditative movement like the traditional Chinese practice of Qigong, improves postural and environmental awareness, which may decrease the risk of falling among seniors, several studies show.

Research also reveals that dance can reduce stress. Martha Eddy, author of *Mindful Movement: The Evolution of the Somatic Arts and Conscious Action* and founder of the nonprofit organization Moving for Life, which uses dance exercise classes to address issues related to cancer and aging, argues that dance allows for a wider range of emotional expression than a spin class does. "We can calm anxiety down with cycling, but with dance you have more capacity to move out of depression," she says. "You might let go of anger for a brief moment and move into pleasure." —Amanda McCracken

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