

Dance as an anti-aging activity

Dance can help preserve mobility, prevent injury, and increase communal connections as we age—why isn't it everywhere?

by Katelyn Potyondy

Music fills the kitchen as my 84-year-old grandfather rapidly spins me into a three-step rock for a classic swing dance. For my grandfather with dementia, social dances like this are not only a form of exercise but a form of nostalgia as well, in his case, for the Bunny Hop, East Coast Swing, and many other partner dances that formed the social scene of his time. For many people like my grandfather, dance can positively reinforce both their physical and mental health. In the elderly community, dance can also serve a vital role in preventing injuries as well as creating community. It seems clear, therefore, that there needs to be greater accessibility of dance to this demographic.

As people age, it's extremely common to experience a slowing down of physical activity, which often leads to frail muscles and a decreased range of motion. Through dance, senior citizens are able to activate their muscles in a low-impact movement pattern that calls on their own creativity and can build physical endurance. In a recent study (Tommasini, Ester, et al), an experiment was conducted to analyze whether or not partner dance gave older people enough stimulation to be classified as a beneficial exercise for the health of this demographic. The study gathered twenty healthy amateur dancers ranging between the ages of 65 and 90 and had the subjects either do ballroom dance or a melodic sequence of steps. The heart rate of each individual was tested to determine if it would meet the standards to be considered aerobic activity classified by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM).

In this experiment, the Viennese Waltz made most subjects' heart rate jump between 58-60 bpm and, depending upon the length of dance, individuals met the threshold for a healthy rate of activity. This experiment showed that partner dancing can be a beneficial form of engagement to physically challenge one's body, not to mention how enjoyable it can be when it encourages socializing (Tommasini 692, 698). The results point to how successful dance can be when offered in nursing homes as well as community centers, as this form of exercise is relatively inexpensive, only costing the fee for an instructor.

Providing even more evidence for dance's role in fighting negative effects of aging, another study pointed to the difference between postural balance of elderly women who do dance and those who don't. They analyzed individuals who practiced samba dancing and studied the postural sway of various people. What emerged was that samba dancers had a higher level of ability in finding their center of gravity and balance when their eyes were closed. In other words, maintaining postural sway through dance increases agility and the ability for people to adjust on their feet, therefore protecting themselves from the risk of falling (Serra, 1-9). Because falling is one of the greatest risks for the elderly, dance becomes even more appealing for this age group, encouraging the development of inner equilibrium and balance. These studies show that dance is

not just about creating shapes and movement but is also an opportunity to strengthen the body and make it more capable to live a full and healthy life as you age.

In a society that often isolates the elderly, dance can offer a space of connection with people of all generations. One of the most unique elements about dance is how it can unify people who are at different points in their journeys through life. While every person has a different degree of mobility, dance and music can provide a common experience of joy and community in moving together. Dance allows a group of individuals to work towards a collective goal, giving many people a sense of purpose, and through this shared experience a sense of community is built. Through dance, older people like my grandfather are transported back to the sweet memories of their earlier years, staying connected to the past while creating meaningful relationships with the people in the present.

For dance majors, it's good to remember that dance can serve a far greater purpose than just a series of steps, or a way to show what you can do, or even a way to create artistic performance. It can also be a way to foster community and preserve the ability to move our bodies and connect to others. The longer you live, the more you can benefit from the way dance combines health-giving exercise with fun, a way to preserve your health and participate in communal events. Dance can play a far greater role than we might think of it how, because it can be a time capsule of the movement of the past and a healthful way to be in the present.

As an artist in the dance world, I want to be able to share my gift and knowledge with individuals such as my grandfather, so that they too can experience the joy of dance. Moving forward, I want to make my mission as an artist to give back to this community. I want to be able to facilitate spaces for the joy of dance to be able to bloom. As we were once nourished by the elderly community, let us take action to give back to this population by cultivating more spaces for this art to be experienced.



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Sources:

Serra, Marcos Maurício, et al. “Balance and Muscle Strength in Elderly Women Who Dance Samba.” *PloS One*, vol. 11, no. 12, 2016, pp. e0166105–e0166105, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0166105>

Tommasini, Ester, et al. “Physiological and Exertional Responses of Partner Dance in Elderly.” *Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness*, vol. 62, no. 5, 2022, pp. 691–99, <https://doi.org/10.23736/S0022-4707.21.12242-X>.