Dancing keeps body and brain limber
Stepping lively one of the few activities offering protection against dementia

By Mario Garrett
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As we age, we experience an increase in body fat, reduced muscle mass, strength and endurance, and diminished balance and aerobic capacity. Normally these deficits result in slowly diminished levels of our functional ability. The resulting loss of functional ability can result in susceptibility to falls, inactivity and depression. This in turn can exacerbate existing conditions or contribute to new, chronic diseases such as diabetes, stroke, cardiac infarction or cancer.

The advice we hear usually involves “exercise and diet.” But there might be more to this than meets the eye.

The benefits of dancing, for example, exceed mere physical exercise. One can easily see the primary benefits include improved balance and a reduced risk of falls. Dance also has been shown to have considerable physical benefits for older adults with arthritis, osteoporosis and neurological conditions.

As early as the 1980s, Robert Katzman, a leader in Alzheimer’s disease research at UCSD, and Joe Verghese from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine (who published his results in 2004) were researching other benefits from dancing.

In a 21-year study of adults 75 years and older, they examined the extent to which physical or mental recreational activities influenced brain health. They studied mental activities such as reading books, writing for pleasure, doing crossword puzzles, playing cards and playing musical instruments. And they studied physical activities like playing tennis or golf, swimming, bicycling, dancing, walking for exercise and doing housework.

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Music and dancing are becoming central features of healthy longevity. Perhaps dancers and musicians are more resistant to dementia as a result of having greater cognitive reserve. They have more ways of thinking. We have a word for this — neurogenesis — where our brain constantly rewires its neural pathways through dancing and playing music.

Gerontologists still argue why dancing shows such benefits and playing tennis, for example, does not. Research using computer exercises show that engaging in unique events stimulates the brain to react and develop. Unstructured dancing, which requires instant reaction to your partner's movements, stimulates the connectivity of your brain. Unique and even frustrating classes have better results, as they create a greater need for new neural pathways. Dancing also makes your gait look better.

In a study in 2005, William Brown and colleagues at Rutgers University found that people appear to be able to pick desirable partners based on the way they dance. The researchers analyzed 183 young dancers by attaching infrared markers and filmed
the markers for one minute. Then they asked peers to evaluate how well the computer-generated figures danced. They found that skillful dancing is associated with desirability and attractiveness.

Dancing simultaneously involves movement, social engagement, musical appreciation and emotional expression. Repeating the poet Edwin Denby, “There is a bit of insanity in dancing that does everybody a great deal of good.”

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