

Dance as a form of exercise

Despite the Government's efforts to get people fitter, many patients remain under-active. In many ways, the culture of the privatisation of exercise is to blame. Many people do not want to pay large sums of money to a private gymnasium and many who do so derive little or no long-term psychological benefit and fail to improve their social skills because they exercise alone (and, since so many get to the gym by car, even the amount of exercise they get is questionable).

Several alternatives exist to getting involved in sports, most of which have the advantage of being cheap or even free and of having no age limits. The most obvious low-cost activities are walking and cycling. Dancing is also an excellent way to improve physical fitness and develop social skills, thereby improving mental health, and is something that can be taken up early in life and still provide plenty of entertainment well after retirement.

The best kinds of dancing to encourage people to take up are those which develop cooperation, either with a partner or within a set. Each type has its own qualities and makes its own demands but there should be something suitable for almost everyone in your area. Even wheelchair-users have their own formation-dancing teams, providing a good non-competitive alternative to basketball.

The qualities and benefits offered by dancing depend on the form concerned but as a general rule, it improves physical health by developing strength, suppleness, coordination and balance in varying amounts. Some of the more 'energetic' forms of dance — Cajun jitterbug, Irish set dance and Scottish country dancing are good examples — provide excellent aerobic exercise. Ballroom and Latin American dancing require good coordination and fluidity of movement. Most people can manage the Playford repertoire of English country dancing (named after the Civil War correspondent who published books of

dances from the mid-17th century onwards) as this is taken at a walk but requires good powers of concentration. Similarly modern American square dancing is taken at a walk but involves progressively more complex movements, making it ideal for anyone with limited mobility who nevertheless requires a challenge (there is some research currently being carried out in the US into how square dancing can be used to delay the progression of dementia but unfortunately serious medical research into the benefits of dance is severely limited both in Europe and North America). The benefits to mental health derive from the improved self-esteem which results from moving to music and cooperating with others, as well as from making new friends.

The main non-profit organisations governing dancing in the UK are the Royal Academy of Dance, which tends to deal with ballet but also covers historical dance and governs the training of many teachers of dance; the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, the English Folk Dance & Song Society (EFDSS) and the British Association of American Square Dance Clubs (BAASDC). Between them, these organisations oversee the vast majority of non-profit dance clubs and classes and can provide information on many other areas of dance should you

hear about something but not understand what it entails.

Outside the dance clubs and societies themselves, many classes are organised by local adult education services or by your local education authority at colleges of further education. Most dance clubs run by affiliates of the EFDSS or BAASDC will charge no more than £3 per lesson including refreshments. Most sessions will last 2–2.5 hours with a half-hour break. Some classes are run by adult education services in conjunction with Extend, a national programme promoting dance and exercise to the over-50s, whose instructors have been trained to work specifically with older people.

Costs, therefore, to the patient, are low. Most clubs will require people to wear either special dance shoes or soft shoes not worn outdoors (to protect sprung floors) but, as a general rule, nobody is expected to buy special outfits. For information on local dance classes contact your local education authority, the EFDSS (www.efdss.org), the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (www.rscds.org), BAASDC (www.squaredancing.co.uk) or, for general information on forms of dance, the Royal Academy of Dance (www.rad.org.uk).

Zoe Bremer