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Dance and Movement in the Advanced Age

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In the early spring in 2017, I entered a living room on the Lower East Side in New York City, transformed into a space for a video shoot. 15 dancers in their advanced age and me in my 30s, as a guest of one of the organizers, were about to record a DVD for "Body Groove Young at Heart," a fitness program designed to keep us healthy, physically active, and mentally alert as we age. On this DVD, Misty Tripoli, founder of dance and wellness practice called The Groove Method™, joined forces with Yvonne Adrian Puckett and Roger Puckett, a formidable dance teacher duo in their 80s and creators of the dance practice Young at Heart™. The space was simple: two couches, a chest of drawers, some chairs, a wooden floor. Some dancers, in their 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s, sat on the chairs and couches, performing movements in a seated position; other dancers moved around in the space, at times in solo dance, at times interacting with one another and improvising in pairs and groups. Our movements were simple and gentle – lifting and lowering the arms, moving the torso side to side, walking and then stopping for spontaneous movements for the torso, or doing a series of three quick steps or "cha-cha-cha's."

One of the songs was a lyrical instrumental piece for the piano, a succession of arpeggios where one single note follows the other instead of a series of chords or harmonized melodies. “We are exercising the agility of the fingers. Feel each note distinctly as you move each finger separately, as if playing separate notes on the piano,” Tripoli said.¹ We were playing the imaginary pianos in the air, on our forearm, on the side of the sofa, on the leg of another dancer, on the floor. “Let’s retain the flexibility of our hands and the health of the finger joints; let’s use our hands for movements that differ from everyday activities,” she added.² I felt how I inhaled and exhaled with the rising and falling phrases of the music. My nervous system began to calm down. We lifted one arm, brought it to the back of the body, looked at it, and moved it to the front again. I felt a satisfying stretch in the side of the body. When I gazed at the fellow dancers, I saw sparkles and softness in their eyes, a brightness that smoothed out the wrinkles on their faces. We were not just pressing imaginary piano keys – the expression of our hearts was in these movements. I felt a surge of compassion for the other dancers and myself.

In this article, I will discuss the ways in which dance, particularly somatic and mindful dance practices, can impact the aging body. What can dance offer to the elderly population? What is meaningful and restorative about experiences like the one I outlined above? What are some of the movement practices that can safely support the health of the body, mind, and emotions as we age?

Physical Activity, Dance, and Age

Numerous studies have demonstrated that physical activity can slow down physical deterioration and be beneficial for the health of the brain and cognitive

functions.³⁴⁵⁶ While physical and brain-related health benefits have created much interest, Movement artist, educator, dance researcher, and author Pegge Vissicaro notes that studying the effect of movement on the whole person in geriatrics literature is relatively little explored. She observes, “The greatest change in my thinking as I age is the discovery that purposeful or intentional movement has the power to provide holistic balance and serve as a stabilizing mechanism for the elderly. ... A holistic approach considers the interrelationships between physicality, emotionality, intellectuality and spirituality.”⁷ Diane Amans, educator and one of the leading practitioners in community dance, similarly points out that numerous evidence-based research studies describe the health benefits of participating in physical activity later in life but it is worthwhile considering what dance can offer in addition to physical benefits. She remarks, “It is an art form and has the potential to engage the whole person; dance offers an aesthetic experience and opportunities for self-expression.”⁸

We face physiological, psychological, and emotional changes as we age. The elasticity in the connective tissue that surrounds the joints is likely to decrease, due to aging process or the fact that we engage in less physical activity. The cartilage, the connective tissue covering the surfaces of bones at joints, can become worn and less elastic, resulting in “wear and tear” of the joints. The muscles reduce in strength and endurance and muscle bulk decreases. Due to the descent in muscle strength and flexibility, stamina lessens. Coordination and balance can be impacted. We are likely to face major changes in the mental and emotional realms as well: loneliness, isolation, loss, grieving, depression, fear, reduced social contacts and changes in financial situation can impact mental and emotional wellbeing.

Mindful, somatic movement modalities and community dance practices can help in several ways. Somatic movement forms focus on participants' connection to movement and finding their own movement expression. There is no judgment, no "right or wrong," no fear of failure. The movements are simple and do not rely on complicated verbal or physical instructions. The participants can gain confidence and enjoyment from moving and experience what the body is able to do, rather than focus on movements that are more difficult. For example, Nia, a movement method developed by Debbie Rosas and Carlos Aya Rosas in the United States in the 1980s, emphasizes listening to and following physical sensations as guides toward wellbeing. In Nia dance classes, instructors show modifications and encourage participants to "tweak" the movements to fit their body's needs so that they can find comfort, pleasure, and joy in movement. The movements include elements from martial arts, dance arts, and healing arts. In "Chair Nia" classes, participants perform the movements in a seated position. Through music and movement, participants are free to express emotions and take part in a group activity, which can contribute to social and emotional health. These classes can help participants with mild to moderate depression, as physical activity is known to have a positive effect on the mood.

In her study, Sara Houston, Principal Lecturer in Dance Studies at the University of Roehampton in the United Kingdom and a leading voice on the benefits of community dance for people with Parkinson's disease, asked the participants in her research study why they had come to class. Many had joined because they found it more challenging to exercise on their own and found dancing more interesting than other exercise modalities. The social impact of dancing was noteworthy: "The dance sessions were a way of feeling

productive, active and sociable.”⁹ Not only were they working on their stamina, balance, muscle strength and bone health but dance as an art form gave more meaning and purpose to their lives and put them in touch with their unique ways of expressing themselves through movement.

Dance Methods

Several methods exist that are designed with the senior demographic in mind. As I mentioned earlier, Yvonne Adrian Puckett (82) and Roger Puckett (83), professional Broadway dancers who have dedicated their lives to dance, have developed a program called Young at Heart. Their motto is “never stop moving.” The movements are simple, playful, and creative and encourage the movers to stay within their comfort zone.¹⁰ Easy-to-follow choreography alternates with moments of free expression and spontaneous movement, either on one’s own or in pairs and groups. The music includes both upbeat and lyrical songs, from Broadway tunes to classical music, country, contemporary hits, and world music. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the duo combined taught over 20 classes per week, ranging from Nia dance to Zumba Gold to Tai Chi. As a fellow teacher of Young at Heart, Marina Thomas, notes, “Their energy is unstoppable and their spirits insurmountable. Their clientele is diverse and develop a sense of trust and commitment. They leave the class feeling safe, rejuvenated and joyful.”¹¹ Full of vitality, the couple is inspiring: the participants want to be like them, to have as much energy and joy as they do in their 80s.

Anna Halprin, a formidable dance visionary, author, performance artist, and choreographer, is another inspiring example. Celebrating her 100th year in 2020, Halprin

continues to teach and perform. With her daughter Daria Halprin, she developed a practice called Tamalpa Life/Art Process, which combines gentle movement, body awareness, writing, drawing, and performance.¹² The movements are improvisatory: dancers respond to certain themes or cues that increase awareness of elements of nature or particular body parts. This practice is holistic in that physicality, imagination, emotions, and expressivity are all being evoked and used. Because of the freedom within the structure, this practice is suitable for a wide variety of ages and is adaptable to older generations.

Halprin's approach offers participants a chance to find their own movements without pre-set choreography. She uses simple instructions such as "extend your arm and hand from the shoulder blade, and notice what happens": the participants are not seeking a movement to evoke a particular state but rather notice what state movement evokes. Another approach is to sense how the body wants to move without any previous ideas. "You don't choose the movement; the movement chooses you. Think of some of our common descriptions of movement in relation to emotion. We jump for joy. We wring our hands in grief. We stomp in anger. When emotional states are intense and images clearly defined, the appropriate movements will arise," she notes.¹³ Halprin incorporates real-life situations and invites movers to express and confront challenging life experiences through dance. Grief, violence, homelessness, isolation, racism, as well as celebration, initiation, or marriage can all be the basis of movement experience and personal or communal dance rituals. Her technique includes performance, with the intent of healing and release. Seeing older people perform and express their emotions and life stories through movement can be a very moving, transformative experience for both the

audience and the performer. Rather than a carefully shaped and externally imposed choreography, we see the uniqueness of each individual, the experiences that have shaped them, the lives they have lived, enacted through movement.

Ageless Grace, developed by Denise Medved, is another innovative movement method. This program activates several functions of the brain – analytical, strategic, kinesthetic learning, memory/recall, creativity and imagination – and addresses over twenty physical skills needed for lifelong optimal function. The program includes 21 simple exercise tools for all ages and abilities. The exercises are based on everyday movements and feel natural and organic. The aim is to support the healthy longevity of the body and mind. The movements can be performed seated in a chair or can be done on a bed, standing near or behind a chair, down on the floor, or in a standing position. The classes use up-beat generation-specific music. The tools and exercises emphasize different anti-aging techniques such as joint mobility, spinal flexibility, right-left brain coordination, bone density, cognitive function, balance, fall prevention, self-esteem, confidence, and playfulness. They promote the ability to respond, react, and recover efficiently and safely. The exercises include sequences of physical movements in patterns that surprise the brain.

Medved's intention was that anyone could perform the movements in Ageless Grace, whether they are healing from a surgery or are in good shape. "Intentionally nourishing the mind-body connection on a daily basis can help improve health and well-being, reduce stress, keep the brain agile and the body responsive. When body, mind, spirit and emotions are in balance, health and well-being follow. Ageless Grace offers something for each of these dimensions," she notes.¹⁴ What makes the practice unique is

the focus on exercising the body and stimulating the brain at the same time. As the founder points out, “Research now supports that we must combine the two for optimal lifelong function and graceful aging. And that we must continue to practice movements we are unfamiliar with in order to create new neural pathways.”¹⁵

Kenny Daley, an Ageless Grace facilitator and movement instructor who specializes in working with the older population, highlights the importance of music in a movement class. He has observed a remarkable change in the mood and physical comportment of people in their advanced age when they hear music that they know. “The dance, with the music, puts the Elder in the moment. I don’t care if the person has limited mobility – if I see them tapping their finger, we’re good!” Daley notes.¹⁶ He believes in the importance of observing and going where their clients are at as well as knowing their experiences with movement and current physical situation. He emphasizes that movement and dance bring us to the present moment and help us appreciate it – we notice what the body feels; we are present with the other people in the room.

Access to movement experiences that are safe and healthy are important for the older demographic at all times but are particularly significant during the restricted movement and health hazards of COVID-19 which can increase feelings of isolation, fear, and insecurity. Meredith Oppenheim, a vitality visionary dedicated to improve the quality and length of life for people as they age, has created an online community called Vitality Society™ which offers a range of classes, talks, workshops, and ways of socializing for people over 60. Oppenheim remarks, “I realized that I could have the greatest impact on people’s lives by keeping them well. It is what older people want, younger people cherish, and our economy will depend on. I believe self-care and

preventive care are the most important forms of healthcare and that's what I set out to do. My platform, Vitality Society™, aims to revitalize a generation that is young at heart and wants to remain vital and vibrant.”¹⁷ The underlying principles of Vitality Society™ include “learn to keep brains healthy and minds sharp,” “meet new people close by and far away,” “achieve serenity to gain clarity and sanity,” and “reduce concerns about health, wealth and more.”¹⁸ They offer a range of classes in yoga, Pilates, Nia dance, Latin dance, strength and flexibility, and dancing with hoops, as well as photography and art making and special sessions with coaches and therapists to address particular needs.¹⁹ These activities support mental and physical well-being and create camaraderie and connection, an important aspect of emotional well-being.

Conclusion

Somatic and mindful dance practices have a lot to offer to the older population. They can improve cardiovascular activity, strengthen bones and muscles, help with balance and stamina. But they can also replenish us emotionally: communal dance experiences can put us in touch with joy, expressivity, connection, and a sense of community, all of which are important factors of a holistic approach to health and wellbeing.

Thinking back to the experience of the video shoot that I described at the beginning of this article, I have in front of my eyes an image of a group of older dancers, many of whom had behind them a lifetime of injuries, heartaches, losses, traumas, and lives fully lived. Their bodies showed how they had aged differently – some had retained more flexibility, range of movement, and strength, and some had less. In my mind's eye,

I see them performing movements that make them feel “able” instead of feeling burdened by the emotional and physical stress of not being able to do certain movements. They sit and move their arms, torso, head, and legs in a seated position. Or they move around freely in the space. They smile at one another. They feel connected, alive, nourished or rejuvenated by the sense of community, music, and connection to their heart and body. <https://www.vitality-society.com/feed>, <https://www.yvonneandrogerdance.com/>, <https://agelessgrace.com/>, and <https://nianow.com/> provide useful resources and further guidance for clients who would like to get involved in such invigorating and healing movement practices.

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