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Is Dancing Good for Men?

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Recent research makes a strong case for the emotional, mental, and physical benefits of dance.^{1 2} While certain types of dance such as hip-hop, urban dance, capoeira, and tango attract men, typically we do not see many men in dance classes. In social dancing situations, men tend to be less frequent on the dance floor. Is dancing good for men's health and wellbeing? What holds them back and how to encourage more men to explore dance? Could men benefit from bodily awareness practices, grouped under the umbrella terms of "somatics," "somatic movement" and "embodiment methods"? In what ways?

The cultural context and upbringing plays a big role in men's approaches toward dancing. In cultures where dancing for men is more prevalent, the aspects that might inhibit men from expressing themselves through movement are not as strong. One of the practitioners in my dance class, originally from the island of La Réunion, noted that when slavery was abolished in La Réunion in 1848, the former slaves celebrated the newly gained freedom through dancing. Dancing and its connection to freedom became rooted in the culture: it is "normal" for men to dance.

Somatic movement educator, choreographer, and dancer Tal Shibi, originally from Israel, noted in an interview with the author, “In Jerusalem there is a school for dance for men specifically. It has to do with the religious background. So there is already a context for men to dance with each other.”

In this article, I place the discussion of men and dance in the general context of the Western world. Mostly based on my interviews with male dancers and movement educators, I will explore what might be holding men back from trying out dance and will discuss some potential benefits of somatic movement and embodiment practices. Somatics refers to a range of movement methods and approaches that highlight the importance of inner connection to the body, the acts of tracing physical sensations and impulses, and feeling the body in movement.

Somatic practices such as the Alexander Technique©, the Feldenkrais Method©, Body-Mind Centering©, Continuum Movement©, the Tamalpa Life/Art Practice©, Nia©, SuryaSoul©, Biodanza©, 5Rhythms©, Gaga dance, contact improvisation, and JourneyDance™, among many others all emphasize moving in ways that participants find pleasurable and freeing. These practices teach us to notice what is happening in the body when we move and how movement impacts our emotions, cognitive capacities, and the imagination.³ Movement workshops and courses do not necessarily need to refer to these practices in particular: instructors might blend their own approaches to embodiment with exercises and approaches developed by the creators of these and other practices. Somatic dance practices typically rely on non-choreographed, improvisational “move your own body’s way” types of movement or a mixture of free dance and simple choreographic patterns.

Dance and Masculinity

In her *Modern Manhood: Conversations about the Complicated World of Being a Good Man Today* (2019), Cleo Stiller discusses the idea of the “Man Box.”⁴ This concept refers to a set of beliefs about masculinity such as men “do not cry openly or express emotions (with the exception of anger),” “do not express weakness or fear,” “demonstrate power and control,” “are not ‘like a woman,’” and are associated with “tough/athletic/strength/courage,” “aggression-dominance,” and “protection.” Stiller shows how these views of masculinity inhibit many men from connecting to who they truly are and restrict their world view, emotions, and behavior.

Dance in the Western world is often stereotypically associated with women and with classical ballet, which can make it challenging for men to enter the world of dance even for health and wellness purposes. Matt Jones, veteran, writer, educator, and fitness coach from Canada, noted in an interview with the author, “Dance is painfully gendered and that creates obstacles. It doesn’t fall under the okay men hobbies of football and cars.” Sharing with other males the fact that one is taking dance classes might be met with derision and laughter. As one of the participants in my dance classes mentioned, his male friends would laugh and say, “Have you lost your mind? Do you want to become a dancer at the Royal Ballet now?” A man needs to be “strong” and “tough” instead of “expressing his emotions” via movement.

“For men to go into a state of dance, a moment when they can be seen, their armor is taken off, their shell of toughness,” Jones pointed out. “If you are someone who lives in your armor all the time, you’re not really making connections with

other human beings. You isolate harder and harder into their own shell of toughness or fantasize about the yesteryears,” Jones said. Urban dance and hip hop are more acceptable as forms of movement because they rely on more common aspects of masculinity and the image of a tough, physically agile and strong man.

Discomfort and fear might be holding men back from trying out dance as well. Jack Goldingham Newsom, entrepreneur from New Zealand, doctoral student of philosophy, and a participant in my dance classes pointed out in an interview, “There is a perception that dance is not masculine or that it brings us out of this position of comfort and security and safety within this stereotypical masculinity. It’s something that requires a bit more expression than many males are used to.” Newsom mentioned that the fear has to do with coming in touch with oneself and what one might find out if one starts moving in different ways. “They might find out that their masculinity is not this strong thing based on violence. They might find out that they actually enjoy expressing themselves in a different way. They might find out that they’re not the person they thought they were,” Newsom said.

Gustavo Gelmini, a Brazilian choreographer and director of his dance company, referred to another potential reason behind men’s discomfort with dancing. “We continue to forget our body – it is too difficult for us to see our body as mortal, as the body that gets sick. We try to get away from the mortal body. We are far from listening to our body. Dancing lets the body speak and we start to listen to it,” he said in an interview with the author. In his view, men typically dance to have a particular image of themselves, to appear powerful and sexy or to show off their armor. They do not dance to “listen to the body.” “I want to be strong. The body is

the product of my image of myself, not of my listening to the body,” he commented on this view.⁵

Tal Shibi pointed out that even in everyday language, the range of expressing emotions tends to be limited for men. “If you ask a man in Israel how they are doing, the answers are ‘pretty good,’ ‘fine,’ and ‘great.’ It really limits the inner experience if you only have these answers,” he said in an interview with the author. In the men’s movement courses Shibi is leading, he encourages men to find more layers of experience and connect them to the body. He might ask a participant, “How are you feeling in your scapulas? Give us a feeling of what is going on in your back space. You might say that you feel neutral and do not feel anything. How about giving it an image, like if you wanted to be poetic. Give it a landscape. Ah, it’s a forest. What is in that forest? Stuff just starts to come up. It’s special, it’s different.”⁶ More varied responses emerge; the body starts to “speak” to us more, and we develop a better connection to ourselves.

Dance Movement and Somatics

Dance has benefits that affect both genders, such as improved cardiovascular health, balance, flexibility, muscle tone, and joint health, as well as the emotional benefits of belonging to a community, greater awareness of physical wellbeing, and an improved ability to notice what is happening physically and emotionally, which can lead to better self-regulation and healthier choices.⁷ Dancing has a positive impact on mood, creativity, emotions, and cognitive abilities.⁸ Can dance bring additional potential benefits for men in particular?

Dancing can help men open up restricted definitions of manhood and explore aspects of their masculinity in a safe and supportive context. Verbal expression of emotions can be difficult for many men: dance movement can encourage men to get in touch with their feelings in a nonverbal way. Shibi underlines connection to emotions as one of the principal benefits of dance movement for men. "It is an immediate doorway to having contact with their emotional body. It's almost like having another channel in which to exist, in which to process. By opening that doorway men can benefit greatly because when they ask themselves big life questions such as, 'Do I want to take this new job offer?,' it is very easy to get 'heady' about it and start listing pros and cons. 'This job pays a little better than the last one, that's a plus.' But if they tuned into their body they might feel like they are just not so excited about it." Shibi is highlighting the benefits of dance for intuition and for listening to physical clues when making decisions.

Dance can help with releasing stress and pressure that many men suffer from. Shibi noted that the men who come to his movement workshops tend to be overwhelmed. "There is a pressure to solve everything all at once. If things are not working out – whether it is in their career or family or relationships – there can be a buildup of pressure. This pressure creates frustration with life and a general lack of ease in the body, of connection to space and pleasure, to potentiality," he noted. Learning to create a space for pausing, reflecting, and processing is important for mental and emotional health.

Somatic movement practices offer one path toward understanding the body, emotions, and physical sensations. Somatic practices are based on the concept of

self-inquiry – we learn about who we are, what stages of life we are going through, and what our body, mind, and soul need via movement. In these practices, there is no pressure to perform in front of others, to impress anyone, or to master anything. Somatic dance forms such as Nia, JourneyDance, SuryaSoul, Tamalpa Life/Art Process, Gaga dance, Continuum, and contact improvisation can help participants become friends with their body and learn to release judgment, criticism, shame, and guilt that they might be holding about their bodies or how they move. In these classes, everyone has the freedom to move as they like and need at a particular moment.

Somatic movement practices can help participants overcome the voice of an inner critic that says “I am not a dancer,” “I am not graceful and flexible,” “I am not good at this,” “I don’t know how to let go,” and “others will laugh at me.”

In Nia dance classes, we alternate between simple choreography and free dance. There is some structure – the simple steps and choreographic patterns – that participants can lean. During free dance segments, I often give instructions such as “find movements for your elbows,” “move your arms high up in the air and explore that space,” “let’s move through the space in a zigzag, in circles, in triangles,” “how about we follow the movements of the left arm in the space,” and “let’s find small movements in the spine, then between the shoulder blades.”

These instructions do not give precise choreography but encourage participants to start exploring movements that emanate from their body and their imagination. We come to movement as movement, not as “dance,” which might bring with it the pressure of “I need to know how to dance.” Participants learn to

develop curiosity about movement and their body and they build skills and self-confidence that they can use in various dance contexts.

These simple exercises and simple instructions such as “put your hands together and follow their movements” are important because they take the focus away from the idea that movements need to look a particular way or that we need to “master” movements. In the words of Jack Goldingham Newsom, the first step on the journey of becoming more in touch with the body is to give the leading role to the body and silence the mental chatter: “You’re not always reflecting on what part of me is moving and why am I moving it but you’re letting something else take the driving seat. And then you become habituated to this feeling of ‘my body is moving, not my mind.’”

Somatic dance practices help us with the self-critical and self-judgmental voice inside of us in another way as well: we practice not taking ourselves too seriously. Dancing can give us a strong sense of physical and emotional freedom. During free dance where everyone can move however they want, I often give participants guiding suggestions such as “let’s do clumsy movements,” “let’s dance awkwardly,” “how about a silly dance, a bizarre dance?”

We play out imaginary scenarios through movement and allow ourselves to be childlike. We imagine that we move like a detective or an undercover police; we go to the beach or join a summer party on a boat where we taste lavish meals; we dance with an imaginary magic sword to counter the obstacles in our lives; we play soccer; we climb hurdles; we move like different animals and birds. We take off the pressure of always being and acting like a serious adult. These moments are often

some of the most refreshing and rejuvenating moments of my classes where the participants learn to bond and let their guard down.

One important aspect of somatic movement practices is the principle of tracing bodily sensations – receiving messages from the body when we do a particular movement or when we lie down, sit, or stand in stillness. Somatic practices offer a way to connect to the inside perspective, to feel the sensations that are inside of us and not necessarily visible or perceptible to others. In Gelmini's words, in somatics, "little by little you become more aware of your musculature. It is a beautiful journey." Jones noted that in his view men are "incredibly disconnected from their bodies or they can be. Men are often taught to not acknowledge either pain or discomfort in the body or even any preferences in their bodies. I am 39 and I'm learning how to have preferences now. Now I am much more aware of my impulses. I am choosing to do things that bring me joy, that do not feel like a toil." Mindful, holistic movement practices can help us tune in with the body and therefore make healthier choices that extend beyond a movement class – choices about what to eat, how to behave in job situations, how to choose relationships, and so on.

The somatic partner dance practice of contact improvisation can be particularly appealing to men. In this method, developed by dancer and martial artist Steve Paxton in the United States in 1972, two partners follow a common point of physical contact as they move together. They use the fundamentals of sharing touch, weight, and movement awareness. The two dancers improvise movement without losing physical contact with each other. The practice is suitable

for both men and women and there are no specific gender roles. The origins of this method are both in dance and in the martial arts; the martial arts component can make it particularly easy for men to identify with.

Shibi, a teacher and practitioner of contact improvisation, talked about his first experiences with this movement practice:

The combination of having a skill and then doing it with others – that’s something I’d experienced in sports, in basketball. The uniqueness of doing that with other people and being so close to other people – the challenge of that, it just blew my mind. It was both fun and uncomfortable at the beginning, to dance really close to other people, to confront all these topics of what am I doing here, it doesn’t always flow, sometimes it does, it can be very awkward. The experience of being able to soften in the body and be lifted by others, to be carried through the space in different ways, not to have to carry everything on your shoulders – I think that was a huge experience. In contact improvisation, you have a lot of strong women – the experience of a woman carrying me was a radical experience.

When we are young, we get to be carried all the time. We feel probably amazing, hopefully, if there’s a lot of loving care around us. And then essentially get put down at some point and that’s it. Now the message is it’s up to you to figure it out. And that can lead to a lot of isolation. It creates a false narrative that as an adult you need to figure it all out on your own and never be carried. And especially for men who are a little bit more old school. I grew up with the narrative of men should figure it out. Mostly keep their

expression to themselves when it comes to feeling vulnerable such as expressing any kind of sadness or needing anything like that. Within that I think I intuitively found out that these qualities which would not come out verbally fit me well because at that time I could not speak about these things like I do now.

Shibi's comments show how exploring dance movement can lead to reflections that go beyond the movement practice. Dance can open nonverbal pathways for exploring vulnerability, softness, inner yearning for affection. Dance can help provide an outlet for disappointment, repressed anger, fear, and fragility, which are all a part of human experience but do not "fit" the "Man Box" described earlier and can thus be hard for men to explore safely.

How to Get Started?

If a man wants to try out dancing and wants to develop more ease with expressing himself physically, how and where to start? How to choose a dance practice?

One way would be to follow one's taste for music. In Gelmini's words, "Connect the dance to the musicality that is in you. If you like to listen to hip hop, try a hip hop class. Everyone has a musicality inside of them. This could be one step to find an intimate connection." Music has an impact on the body and inspires us to move in particular ways. In many improvisational dance practices such as 5Rhythms and Gaga dance, there is no need to be "musical" and "follow the beat." Music gives

inspiration, an impulse, a mood perhaps, but there is no expectation to catch a particular rhythm in movement.

To a timid person who wants to dance, Gelmini would say, “listen to your own time, your own expression without expectations from others and yourself. Expression is unique, it is your connection to the world. A shy person needs to experience. The more the shy person experiences, the more he can get out of his neurosis that everybody is looking at him. Experience, do everything! Confront your vulnerability – through your vulnerability you find your potency. When the shy person finally opens the door and expresses himself, he can be the most interesting dancer because he wants to dance so badly.”

Online options are excellent for more timid dancers because participants can turn their cameras off and be in charge of their own dance space and experience. Online classes make participants feel like they have a dance practice and a community but they do not necessarily need to interact with the community or feel “seen” by them. As Newsom put it, “I’m in my room so it doesn’t matter, no one is seeing me. I had to trick myself into feeling, ‘let’s just see what happens; let’s just go with the flow. It’s not dance, it’s just movement.’”

Taking a few dance classes to build some skills is a good way to start. “When you take these classes, be really soft with yourself and don’t compare yourself to anybody. Don’t dance with anybody else’s body, meaning don’t say ‘Oh this person is flowy’ or ‘I’ll never be that fit.’ You dance with your body and you feel into your sensations and your feet and your breath. And then you go to another class and you dance with your body and your breath. And then you go to another class and you

dance with just with your body. By the fourth class you'll be like 'you know what, I connect these things. I can do this, whether it's tango or contact improvisation or Nia or improvisational dance. And from there, you find community. It has to be a culture that you like," Shibi notes. Some people like the communal nature and the musical tradition of capoeira, some prefer the partner dancing in tango and salsa, and some like improvisational dance practices that focus more on the individual and give the practitioner a space to be with his own body and emotions.

Trying out workshops and classes for men only is another good option. In Shibi's words, "similarly to women's groups, there is a dropping of some need to impress, an extra layer of looking around to see how I am being seen by members of the opposite sex, am I being seen or not. Am I allowed to lift my arms over my head and breathe and make sounds – how would that act be perceived if there were women in the room? For most heterosexuals that would be a very different experience if the room was full of men versus with women. This movement could be a physical way of saying 'hey, I'm open, I'm sensitive, this is another part of me.'" Shibi noted that this simple movement of holding the arms up in the air can be emotionally healing. In a group of men, it would communicate nonverbally the idea that the man feels safe in this group of other men. "They are not against you. It's not always a competition. You don't have to always compete with them over jobs, women, and resources. There is a support system."

To develop a soulful connection to the healing power of dance and movement, Shibi recommended building a practice of intimate time with the body. It could be five minutes. "When people hear the word 'meditation,' they have the idea

that you sit like a statue and you have to endure. You can forget all about that word. We're just taking five minutes out of your day and we're reframing it as body time, as time that you are giving to yourself to nourish yourself." During that time, you can guide your attention to different parts of the body, such as the backspace, the belly, the breath itself, and the different sensations. "8-12 minutes like that for most people in a day will reorient their relationship with themselves. It can be simplified and introduced as a part of healthy maintenance." This daily ritual could involve movement, improvisation, or any other kind of physical activity.

Conclusion

One way for men to become more at ease with the practice of dancing is to see it within the larger context of their lives. Dance movement can offer a nonverbal method of learning about who we are and where we are going with our lives. It can provide a safe container in which we tackle past traumas, heal inner wounds, and open up new pathways for moving forward. As Kenny Daley, practitioner and teacher of Nia dance and Ageless Grace, noted in an interview with the author, "Dancing is an inner journey first. Then couples dancing, such as Latin dances, opens up a whole new universe. My body is the Temple for my Soul. Ask each man how's that relationship going?"

Dance can be an adjacent practice that supports the rest of the physical activities that a man undertakes. Matt Jones noted that for him, body building is the central practice and dancing is a way to develop flexibility, ease, joy, and connection to emotions. "Emotions come through the body. We experience the emotions

physically,” he noted as he talked about the emotional benefits of dancing. He seeks out dance to challenge himself: he went to a ballet class because he noticed that his initial response was that of fear. “This is exactly the reason to do it,” he told himself and in the end, he was surprised to find out how much the ballet class resembles a boxing gym: both practices demand for an incredible amount of grit, perseverance, and dedication to the body.

Taking dance and movement classes for health and wellness purposes can make men feel more physically expressive in other contexts as well. Previously, Jones considered himself a “wall flower” or needed a few beers to get him on the dance floor. Now, after practicing dance for over a year, he steps onto the dance floor with ease. Dancing in social circles is not about showing off, impressing others, or networking: “It is about how far you have come on the healing journey of liking your body,” he said. “Dance is a path on the healing journey. For a man to take that step on the healing journey – to acknowledge that he needs healing – he has to do a considerable amount of work.”

Medical professionals can suggest movement and dancing for men’s health and wellbeing. We can learn to take off the stigma of a dancing man by encouraging boys to engage in creative movement and dance from early on and by showing with our words, emotions, and attitudes that dancing for men is normal, natural, healthy, and fun. Since a lot of the judgment toward the dancing man comes from men themselves, it is crucial that men learn to view dance as another type of movement, perhaps more creative and expressive than forms of athletics but movement nevertheless. Dance movement does not make men “less” masculine but more so

because their understanding of their own selves, their bodies, masculinity, and identity becomes more holistic, humane, accurate, and in tune with their health.

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