

Dance Therapy

His face is full of deep lines. The corners of his lips curl into a barely noticeable smile and his grey lashes close over his eyes as he puts his arms around his partner's waste. The music starts. He starts to mutter "ba, ba,ba," under his breath, singing off beat to the 1,2,3 timing of the waltz. He is partially deaf. But why would someone who has difficulty hearing want to come to a dance class?

Dancing is more than music and movement. The physicality of holding someone and sharing movements fulfills a sense of companionship, waning loneliness without even having to speak. Dance can double as therapy for socially shy people struggling with emotional isolation.

"There is something about dancing that has a level of intimacy. You're touching someone, holding each other," says 65-year-old Jon Yuen, instructor of the Two Right Feet Ballroom dance class. Yuen teaches an amateur dance class that, unlike most dance groups, specifically encourages shy and uncoordinated individuals to join. "I like to give back to the community," says Yuen, who volunteers his time to instruct the class.

Anna Coutinho, a soft-spoken 60-year-old woman who has been coming to Yuen's lessons for the past five months, dances her way around the room with a man she has never met before. The way they hold each other seems as if they are lovers. "I live alone, so I don't bring a partner," says Coutinho. "Dance is a good way for people to spend time with others without feeling the normal social pressures." She pointed over her shoulder to the old, hunched, partially deaf man. "He has been coming here for a long time. He has no one. I think these classes make him feel good since he never seems to know what's going on, but always comes back."

Although many dancers have been coming to Two Right Feet Ballroom classes for months, they stand shyley as if not really knowing the other participants. But everyone appears to fall into a happy trance once the music starts and they are holding onto a stranger, a partner.

"Right now I am doing a research about hugs and how they can help reduce self-perceived stress, which like dance, is a meaningful touch," says Dr. Brad Meisner, a psychology professor at Ryerson University. Meisner has been studying touch and comparing it to communication. "Loneliness and anxiety react to physical contact the same way it would verbal contact." According to Meisner's research, being touched in a meaningful way is comparable to comforting words; it reduces the amount of stress hormones. Meaningful touch and comforting words may influence people similarly, but dancing has an extra therapeutic component. "When it comes to dancing, it is also a physical activity that gets your heartbeat up. When your heartbeat goes up you burn more stress hormones, which puts people in a positive mood."

Barbara Hopkins, a 49-year-old dance student, is one of Yuen's longest participants. "It's nice to be part of a dance class that is so informal and relaxed," says Hopkins, "And dancing calmly with a partner makes you feel like you're part of something special."

Dance can be an alternative for interaction and engagement without the need for verbal communication. It is a comforting outlet for those who are lonely to feel together.

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