

More than movement: the amazing power of dance for people living with Parkinson's

From a pioneering training session in London to bringing the joy of dance to the North of England, Angela Kirkham outlines her journey to make movement, music and friendship accessible to people living with Parkinson's

There is something quite extraordinary about watching a person discover that their body can still move in ways they thought might no longer be possible. It might be a hand reaching out to conduct an imaginary orchestra, a foot tapping in time to a familiar tune, an arm sweeping gracefully through the air, or simply a smile spreading across someone's face as the music begins.

For people living with Parkinson's, these moments can mean so much more than learning a dance step. They are moments of freedom, confidence, connection and joy.

My own journey into Dance for Parkinson's began with an invitation that would change the way I thought about dance and its place in our communities. I was invited to London to take part in one of the early training sessions led by David Leventhal, from the internationally renowned Mark Morris Dance Group in the USA, alongside the work being pioneered by English National Ballet.

It was an opportunity to learn from people who understood that dance could offer something remarkable to those living with a neurological condition. I came away inspired by the possibilities and determined to help make this opportunity available to people much further north.

A vision that deserved to reach everyone

At the time, Dance for Parkinson's was becoming increasingly established in the south of England, with exciting developments and growing recognition. Yet bringing the same opportunities to the north was a very different challenge.

It was not simply a matter of finding a studio, putting on some music and inviting people to dance. There was the work of raising awareness, helping people understand what these sessions could offer, building trust, finding the right support and overcoming the practical barriers that so often stand in the way of community initiatives.

There were people who had never imagined that a dance class could be for them. There were families and carers who needed reassurance. There was the challenge of establishing something new in an area where the opportunities were not as readily available.

Progress took determination, patience and a belief that people in the north deserved the same access to this inspiring work as those elsewhere. But when you believe in something, you keep going.

The aim was never to create a conventional dance class where people were expected to remember complicated choreography or achieve a particular standard. It was to create a welcoming space where everyone could participate in their own way, at their own pace, and experience the pleasure of moving to music. That philosophy remains at the heart of Dance for Parkinson's today.

What makes dance so powerful?

Parkinson's can affect movement, balance, coordination, posture and walking. People may experience tremor, stiffness, slowness of movement and difficulties initiating or controlling actions. The condition can also affect mood, confidence and social connections.

Dance brings together many of the things that can become challenging, but approaches them in a creative, enjoyable and supportive way. Music provides rhythm. Visual demonstrations offer cues to follow. Imagery encourages people to think about movement differently. Reaching, stretching, stepping, turning and changing direction can all be explored in manageable ways, with seated options and adaptations where needed. Rather than concentrating on what the body cannot do, dance invites people to explore what it *can* do.

A sweeping arm movement might become the flight of a bird. A gentle step might turn into a walk through an imaginary garden. Hands might tell a story, feet might find a rhythm, and the whole room might become an orchestra conducted by its dancers.

There is no need to get everything right. There is no examination, no audition and no pressure to perform. The experience is about participation, expression and enjoyment. And, of course, there is laughter. Plenty of it!

A familiar piece of music can bring back memories, spark a conversation or encourage someone who arrived feeling uncertain to join in. People begin to encourage one another, friendships develop, and the class becomes something to look forward to rather than another appointment associated with a medical condition. For an hour, people are not defined by Parkinson's. They are dancers, artists, musicians, friends and members of a community.

The evidence: more than a feel-good activity

The joy of dance is reason enough to value it, but there is also a growing body of scientific research examining its potential benefits. A study of English National Ballet's 12-week dance programme, published in 2013, explored both the physical effects of ballet-inspired movement and participants' experiences. All 14 people who began the programme completed the 12 weeks. The researchers found improvements in balance and stability, although they did not find a measurable improvement in posture. Participants described the classes as an important and motivating part of their lives.

The study highlighted something particularly important: dance offers physical, intellectual, artistic and social experiences together. Its value cannot always be captured by a single clinical measurement.

A systematic review and meta-analysis published in 2015 examined five trials of dance for people with Parkinson's. Compared with no intervention, the analysis found improvements in motor symptoms, balance and walking speed. When compared with other exercise interventions, dance also showed benefits in balance and Parkinson's-related quality of life. The authors cautioned that further, better-designed research was needed to establish the longer-term effects.

More recently, a 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis examined 13 trials involving a total of 496 participants. It found evidence that dance could improve mental health and potentially

quality of life compared with inactive control groups, although the quality-of-life estimate was less conclusive statistically.

Research published in *Neurology* in 2024 also reported promising findings from the PD-Ballet study, a randomised controlled trial. Participants in the ballet-based intervention showed improvements in overall non-motor symptoms, motor symptoms and Parkinson's-related pain immediately after the programme, compared with the control group.

These findings are encouraging. They support the view that dance can be a valuable complement to conventional Parkinson's care and exercise, rather than a replacement for medication, physiotherapy or other recommended treatments. Research is still developing, and dance will not have the same effect on everyone. Nevertheless, the evidence gives us good reason to take this work seriously. And the numbers tell only part of the story.

The benefits you cannot always measure

Ask someone who attends a Dance for Parkinson's class what makes it special, and the answer may have little to do with a clinical score. It might be the confidence to try something new. It might be having a reason to get dressed and leave the house. It might be seeing friends who understand the challenges of living with Parkinson's without needing everything to be explained.

For some people, the condition can make everyday activities feel unpredictable. Fear of falling, changes in mobility and concerns about being seen struggling can gradually reduce confidence and lead to social isolation.

A welcoming dance group can help challenge that withdrawal. Participants can move alongside others who understand, adapt movements to suit their own needs, and discover that there are many ways to take part. Carers and partners may also benefit from sharing an enjoyable experience that is not centred entirely on illness or caregiving. Dancing with their mobility aids or wheelchair is more than welcome, or simply having someone to support anyone unsteady enjoy the freedom.

There is also the sheer pleasure of music. A favourite tune can unlock memories, stir emotions and create a shared experience that words alone cannot always achieve. Dance encourages concentration, listening, imagination and decision-making. It brings the mind and body together, while the group setting offers companionship and a sense of belonging. These things matter. They are part of living well, not simply of managing symptoms.

Why the fun matters just as much as the science

One of the most important lessons from this work is that people are more likely to keep doing something they genuinely enjoy. Exercise can sometimes feel like another task on a long list of things a person has been advised to do. Dance offers a different invitation: come and enjoy yourself.

We might be reaching for the sky, making shapes with our arms, moving to a beautiful piece of classical music or finding the rhythm in a lively number. We might be laughing at ourselves, cheering one another on or discovering an unexpected talent.

Nobody needs to be a trained dancer. Nobody needs to stand for the whole session. Movements can be adapted for people who prefer to remain seated, and everyone should be encouraged to work within their own abilities and follow appropriate advice about safety. What matters is that people feel welcome, valued and free to explore movement without fear of getting it wrong.

The atmosphere is creative, sociable and full of life. And when the music starts, something wonderful can happen: people stop worrying about whether they are doing it perfectly and simply begin to dance.

A community worth fighting for

Looking back on my journey, from that early training in London to the challenge of helping establish Dance for Parkinson's in the north, I feel strongly that these opportunities should never depend on where someone lives. Access to dance, creativity and companionship should not be a privilege reserved for people in major cities or those who already know where to look for support.

Community dance has an important role to play alongside health and social care. It can provide a positive, welcoming environment where people living with Parkinson's are recognised for their abilities, encouraged to remain active and given opportunities to connect with others. This is especially important in communities where transport, isolation, limited local provision or financial pressures can make accessing activities more difficult.

At Kirkham Henry Performing Arts, this belief sits at the heart of our wider commitment to inclusive dance and creative health. We believe dance should be accessible to people of all ages and abilities, including those living with neurological conditions. Our studios and outreach venues are not just places to learn steps; they are places where people can find community, confidence and a sense of belonging.

The challenge is to ensure that programmes like Dance for Parkinson's are supported, sustained and recognised for the contribution they can make to people's lives. That means encouraging partnerships between dance organisations, health professionals, Parkinson's support groups and branches, social prescribers, funders and local communities. It means recognising the value of specialist training and making classes affordable and accessible. Above all, it means listening to the people who attend and understanding what makes a difference to them.

The dance goes on

My journey began with an invitation to learn from inspiring practitioners who were already exploring the possibilities of dance and Parkinson's. The challenge was to help bring that vision to the north, where more people could discover its benefits for themselves.

The science continues to develop, and there is more to learn about which approaches work best for different people. But we do not need to wait for every question to be answered before recognising the value of a room full of people moving, laughing, creating and supporting one another.

Dance cannot cure Parkinson's. It cannot remove every difficulty or promise that symptoms will improve. But it can offer opportunities for movement, expression, enjoyment and connection that deserve to be taken seriously.

Sometimes the most powerful moment is not a perfect step or a measurable improvement. It is the person who arrives feeling hesitant and leaves smiling. It is the laughter shared across the room. It is the friend made, the confidence rediscovered, or the realisation that there is still so much to enjoy.

That is the true power of Dance for Parkinson's: it brings together evidence and emotion, movement and music, individual courage and community spirit. And, above all, it reminds us that people living with Parkinson's are not simply living with a condition. They are living lives filled with personality, humour, memories, hopes and possibilities.

They deserve every opportunity to keep moving, keep connecting and keep dancing.