

[ MIND YOUR BODY ]

# Dance Yourself Happy

Why swinging your body lifts your spirit **By Lane Anderson**

**W**E'VE BECOME A nation of arm-chair dancers, mesmerized by *Dancing with the Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance*. But research shows that getting a groove on yourself is more beneficial—improving social skills, lifting your spirits, even reversing depression.

In a recent study at the University of Derby, depressed patients given salsa dancing lessons improved their moods significantly by the end of the nine-week, hip-swiveling therapy. Researchers cite the endorphin boost of exercise, plus the social interaction and concentration that dancing requires, and the increased self-confidence from learning a new skill.

In a recent German study of music and partner dancing, 22 tango dancers had lower levels of stress hormones and higher levels of testosterone after dancing with partners, and they felt sexier and more relaxed. In a study done at the University of New England, participants who spent six weeks learning tango's fancy footwork recorded significantly lower levels of depression than a control group who took no classes, and results similar to those of a third group who took meditation lessons. Study author Rosa Pinniger credits the extreme focus—or “mindfulness”—of dance, which interrupts negative thought patterns that contribute to anxiety and depression.



EVERETT COLLECTION

The physically expressive nature of dance also helps people release and thereby recognize pent-up feelings, the first step to dealing with them. “Depressed patients tend to have a curved back, which brings

the head down so it’s facing the ground,” says Donna Newman-Bluestein, a dance therapist with the American Dance Therapy Association. “Dancing lifts the body to an open, optimistic posture.”

## GET A MOVE ON

Even if you haven’t strapped on dance shoes since seventh-grade etiquette class, you can gain the benefits of moving to music. Here are some options for getting started:

### ■ Dancing with Yourself

You can use dance to free your inner Beyoncé and improve your concentration, simply by moving to music at home. “Getting a beat going in your body can get you out of a disorganized fog,” says Karen Bradley, professor of dance at the University of Maryland, and director of the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies in Manhattan. “Rhythm or a beat gives you a single focus.”

### ■ Strictly Ballroom

“If you can walk, you can do the Argentine tango,” insists Pinniger, who admits that some concentration and improvisation are required. But, she says, the effort pays off because it forces the brain to take a break from negative thinking. “It gives you hope that you can control the thoughts elsewhere, too.”

### ■ Join the Dance Crew

Research shows that moving with others expands your sense of self and of social connectedness. No macarena at a bar mitzvah in your future? Join a group class. Start with a form of dance in line with your personality to facilitate learning. Super structured and orderly? Try ballet. Expressive or assertive? African dance. Playful? Zumba.