

[A chance to dance](#)



Partner dancing provides health benefits, community connection and fun.

by **Kelsey Blackwell**

Making her way across the floor, not with her usual cautious steps but instead by gliding and twirling, Raven Henderson wasn't exactly sure how she had arrived in a ballroom dance class. It was certainly not a place where she'd ever imagined she'd feel comfortable. But amid the laughter and occasional misstep, one thing was certain: "I loved every minute of it," she says. "It was life-changing."

Henderson, 36, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2014, found herself flirting with fancy footwork as part of an inaugural study evaluating the impacts of partner dancing for MS.

While the impacts of physical exercise for MS are well-documented and show such benefits as reduced fatigue and improved balance, cognition and mood, there's little, if any, research on dance—something Alexander Ng, PhD, associate professor of exercise science at Marquette University, sought to remedy when he began the study in 2014. His research included Henderson and 21 others living with MS in the Greater Milwaukee area.

"We wanted to do something that was fun and that people would go out of their way to attend as opposed to trying to force themselves," Dr. Ng says. "In my mind that's the key to getting people to be more active."

An important distinction of partner dance is that it offers participants with MS the support of

another individual. This added stability can help offset the pull of gravity and offer protection from a possible fall. Both factors might allow people with MS to perform movements otherwise difficult for them.

Another benefit is the social interaction. It's hard not to connect when dancing face-to-face with another person throughout a class. And with partners rotating frequently, participants have the opportunity to bond with numerous people.

Early on, this became a clear draw for Henderson. "When I started the study, I had just been diagnosed, and I wasn't talking to anyone about my MS. I was shut down," she says. "But week after week, I was with people who knew even though we didn't talk about it. On a mental note that helped me more than I could have ever imagined."

Encouraging findings

In the study, participants diagnosed with either relapsing-remitting, secondary progressive or primary progressive MS agreed to two ballroom dance classes per week for eight weeks. Many brought significant others as partners; others were provided partners from the study staff.

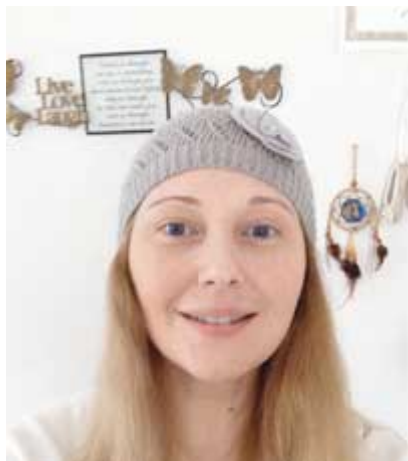
Participants were measured against a control group of people with MS who did not participate in the classes. At the end of the study, dancers outperformed controls on physical tests measuring mobility, endurance, coordination and fatigue.

What's more, participants showed improvements in memory on a standardized test, a result that Dr. Ng suspects is due to the cognitive demands of learning new dance steps. Pending peer review, he expects the study to be published soon.

"Filling my head with complicated Argentine tango steps really beats thinking about my MS," says Sarah Zoric, 36, who was diagnosed with MS in 2011. Though she was not part of the study, Zoric has been practicing ballroom dance for over a year at a studio near her Montclair, New Jersey, home. "I tend to forget I even have MS when I'm dancing. There are so many other things to think about."

Express yourself

Allison Bryant, a Long Island-based professional dancer who was diagnosed with MS in 2006, appreciates yet another aspect of dance: "It's a creative outlet because it combines art and exercise," she says. Bryant's diagnosis came while she was still studying dance at Hofstra University on Long Island, leading her to fear that her career would stall before it had even started. And for a few frustrating years, it did. But through her own creativity, she's begun dancing and teaching again.



Allison Bryant is a professional dancer and dance instructor who lives with MS. “What’s great about dance is that it’s so adaptable,” she says. Photo courtesy of Allison Bryant

When she’s demonstrating upper body moves to her students, for example, Bryant sits in a silk hammock, so she’s not weighed down by gravity and is able to move her hands, chest and torso freely to teach new choreography. When she’s ballroom dancing, depending on her energy level, she sometimes uses a rollator, a type of walker with wheels and a seat, which allows her to maintain balance and move with ease.

Though she primarily works with children, Bryant has taught dance to adult students with MS. She says even people who don’t consider themselves dancers can benefit from learning a few moves. “You can take something simple like sidestepping, modify it and make it a grapevine and you have a dance step,” she says. “It’s fun and you think, well, if I can do this, what other things can I do?”

When Zoric first walked into a dance studio in 2014, she had zero dance experience, which she says is the point. “The instructors aren’t there to critique you; they’re there to teach you technique and help you learn. You really don’t have anything to lose.”

In the short time she’s been dancing, Zoric has already participated in three ballroom-dance competitions. She and her husband took home an award for best newcomers last year. “We’re really not very good,” she chuckles. “But it’s such a positive environment and the dancing builds confidence.”

Not strictly ballroom

For those interested in dabbling in dance, Bryant suggests working with a physical therapist

or dance instructor to incorporate a few dance steps into a fitness regimen. (And always check with your healthcare provider before beginning a new program.) Work with someone who has experience teaching students with MS or who is open to modifying movements as necessary.

“Most styles of dance and their intensity can be easily adjusted to a participant’s skill set and energy level. This is key,” says John Marmarou, a physical therapist specializing in MS, and executive director at Total Rehab Fitness based in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. “We call it push and pull,” he says. “If someone is feeling great, they can push a little harder.”

Because of the support of a stable partner, ballroom dance may be the most accessible form for people with MS, says Bryant. Whatever style you choose, she suggests taking it slowly. “As with any exercise, take frequent breaks,” she says. “I have a lot of fatigue and dancing has actually helped me build my endurance.”

Dance can be modified for other MS symptoms, too. Balance challenges, for example, can be managed by using a ballet barre or a walker, Bryant says. With time, as your body becomes stronger and your confidence builds, you can try more things.

If you’re experiencing pain, it doesn’t mean you should not dance, but consult first with a physical therapist who is versed in MS and orthopedic issues, Marmarou suggests.

“What’s great about dance is that it’s so adaptable,” Bryant says. “I have danced in a wheelchair and other assistive devices. Dance is not just about turns or leaps; it’s about expressing oneself through movement. You don’t have to be able to run or jump to do that.”

Kelsey Blackwell is a freelance writer in Berkeley, California.

Even if you use a wheelchair, dance is possible. Download the Society’s brochure, [Just Dance](#).

Watch [this video](#) of Sarah and Steve Zoric ballroom dancing.

Watch [Exit Stage Never](#), an inspiring video of Amy Meisner, a woman with MS who dances in her wheelchair, does choreography, and has used a virtual reality camera to expand her experience.