

Dancing for Dementia – Dancing with Mood & Memory

Dancing is fun and joyous. Dance is about doing and being simultaneously. Movement brings us into touch with our imagination, our creativity, our sense of wellness, our bodies. It has the ability to alter the mind, affect our behaviours, emotions and our relationships with others in positive ways.

DanceMoves is passionate about dance and movement making a real difference in dementia care, giving people who have lost the skills of, or option for, ordinary conversation an opportunity to express themselves in a different way. As non-verbal forms of communication, movement and dance are particularly suitable in the treatment of people with dementia and match well with the concept of person-centred care.

We aim to deliver high quality dance experiences to people, with the dual core aims of alleviating health issues, and bringing an arts practice to people to help find meaning and narrative in life.

We are about putting bodies into motion, facilitating opportunities for people to literally get back in touch with themselves.

We are making a film about the project – keep an eye out for it.

To find out in more detail how our Dancing for Dementia project has worked so far, read on:

Dancing for Dementia - Moving with Memory and Mood is a 10 week integrated dance project. It invites people living with Dementia to come weekly to dance, with their partners or carers. The group includes participants from different walks of life, who have an interest in movement and dance, and dementia.

To begin, we take time to sit together in a circle, and to remind ourselves of names, and acknowledge that we are there, that we are part of this group. We begin to relax by looking at ordinary everyday objects that evoke responses, memories, qualities of being. Often, these qualities find their way into our movement sequences. We create narratives and stories about these objects – some of the stories are true-enough ones from our personal histories, others fly straight from our imaginations. We tell these stories to each other, and then we share them with the larger group. There is a sense of allowing our bodies to soften into the landscape created in the room by our words.

Now that we are relaxed we begin to engage the body in movement - we stretch, open, reach, explore, lift, lean and shift. We work with weight, with pressure, with space and with our different body parts. We dare to improvise with our movement, doing this in duets, and seated, inviting our minds to become more fully engaged with the dynamics of our movement. There is an accompanying sense of openness about what we do – none of us can ever know quite where our movement will take us. There is also a sense of inevitability – something will happen. It always does.

Our seated duets progress into standing duets, trios, and quartets. We find the strength in our legs, the alignment in our bones, and push into the floor with invigorated feet to trust our balance. Chairs are pushed back, more floor space is claimed for the dancing. Body postures shift as our bodies re-structure in space. We return to favourite dancing partners, or try dancing with someone new to us. The room fills with movement.

Now that we have explored and created our unique dances, some of us are ready to engage with the familiar, the known, and the traditional. We use favourite and fantastic songs to dance a bit of rumba, waltz, cha cha. Some of us use find our own dancing over these dance blueprints. We change partners, we talk – we are invoking the tea dance social. Some of the best songs come from the musicals, so inevitably we often find ourselves singing along. Important to rest, so we break for refreshments.

We sit around two tables with our teas and coffees, and the socialising begins in earnest. Time to catch up, swap stories, share who and how we are.

We also use this time to fill in questionnaires that are have been devised to help document reflections and impressions about the project.

We take it in turns to scribe for one another. Its not always easy to have to think through the questions, but every word helps us all build a picture of how this very important and precious group is working.

We have about half an hour left now. This last part of our session already has a ritual. We set up our chairs around an imaginary stage. Our chairs are placed around this stage, as if we were at a dance hall, like in the good old days.

Over the weeks, we have been gently building a sequence of movements – call it our dance, if you like. We add new qualities to the dance, we add new movements. In one session we had spent some time looking and touching feathers; Bob shared some fascinating facts about the physics of aerodynamics. Unsurprisingly, our sequence that week had 'lift' added to it.

One week we had the gift of having a musician accompanying us live on her keyboard. Laura played alongside our dancing – weaving her sounds around our movement; we loved the experience of responding to the lyricism of her playing.

In one of our early sessions, two of our gentleman participants taught us the following exchange, which was often used in Liverpool when embarking upon the perilous business of asking someone to dance with you.

“Are you dancing?”
... “Who's asking?”
“I'm asking”
... “Then I'm dancing.”

This then is how we complete our session. Seated in our chairs, we wait for the music. When it begins, one by one, we stand and do the walk over to another. When we can remember the words, and even when we can't, we invite each other to dance. It never takes long for the room to be filled with all sorts of dancing. Free dancing, improvised dancing, social dancing, fearless dancing, close dancing, singing dancing. We are all dancers.

We finish by re-forming into a circle, take the opportunity to engage with the process of stillness and quiet in company, and find an ending.

In our own words:

Dancing is...

A smile on my face brilliant, beautiful, enriching, courageous *it gets better and better*

fun & rich sooo good *excellent* uplifting **great** very expressive delectable and

delightful enjoyable **exhilarating** relaxing & uninhibiting *liberating* Dancing is
life.

The 10 week project was devised and delivered by DanceMoves in Cambridge. Sessions were held at the bespoke dance studio at the Deakin Centre, Addenbrooke's Hospital. Support in kind was received by the Deakin Centre. Main funding came from Cambridge City Council. Additional funding was received by the Cambridgeshire Community Foundation, and by Cambridge University Colleges.

DanceMoves worked with filmmaker Toby Peters to create a film for the project.
Photographs by Tomo Brody and Toby Peters.