

Move Dance Feel

In 2016 community dance artist **Emily Jenkins** launched a project offering weekly dance and movement sessions to women recovering from cancer. The project has proved very successful, bringing about a variety of benefits for the women involved

Approximately 2.5 million people are currently living with cancer in the United Kingdom. By 2020 it is estimated that almost one in two people will get cancer at some point in their lives(1). This suggests that each of us will bear witness to the turbulent effects of diagnosis and treatment, either directly or in relation to someone we love.

My first personal encounter with cancer was in my teens, as I witnessed my grandfather wrestle with the devastating effects of melanoma. I recall visiting him shortly before he died and being very affected by how much the disease had taken over, consuming him both physically and spiritually.

The image of his emaciated frame had a profound impact on me and left a lasting impression. Over time, as I supported close friends in grappling with the disease, I particularly noticed the overwhelming effects on the body. Experiences such as this fuelled my desire to use dance as a holistic means of helping people.

I launched Move Dance Feel in East London to explore what community dance could offer in the context of cancer recovery, and to address a recognised need for post-treatment support. Around 70% of people that have had cancer report physical and emotional side effects between one and ten years after treatment(2). Unfortunately, there is a significant lack of support for people post cancer as they are deemed to be 'cured'.

The Move Dance Feel project is centred around artistic practice, where women come to dance instead of talk about their cancer. They meet each week to be active, creative and most importantly to laugh and have fun. Having the opportunity to

express themselves through dance, and build relationships via physical communication, has been very liberating for some;

"I think it's the non-verbal side of it which I like, it seems to allow me to express a part of myself which I don't think I can express through any other way," said one participant.

This highlights that UK cancer care services can be considered limited in their model of care, prioritising support groups that are reliant on people verbalising their cancer experiences. In addition participants come from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, speaking many languages. Dance offers an alternative means through which to communicate.

I made the group women-only to ensure participants could trust and relate to one another in a safe environment. Whilst all cancers are devastating, cancers that affect women, such as breast and womb, can be incredibly invasive with treatments causing complex repercussions. Procedures can involve the removal of reproductive organs, and cause physical and emotional distress as women are forced to deal with radical changes to their bodies. They must adjust, adapt and live with an altered image of themselves.

During the project's initiation, I conducted a focus group, observations and interviews to research and explore what benefits may arise from providing dance in this context, and whether such benefits connected to notions of wellbeing. The findings revealed five areas of significance: positivity; relationships; self-expression; managing challenges and accomplishment; reinventing yourself and openness. They demonstrated a specific overlap with the psychological

PERMA model of wellbeing(3).

During the focus group, a woman said, "After cancer you have to kind of reinvent yourself... you can't go back to who you were before, you have to find a new normal."

This statement planted questions in my mind as to how one begins to do that, when all aspects of your life have been hijacked by cancer. How do you start to (re)build?

What has resulted from a female only group is an immense feeling of intimacy and honesty, with one woman describing the group as a family. Due to a shared understanding of the challenges they face, both in and outside of the dance space, participants are compassionate and encourage one another. This has had a positive impact on their sense of ability and resilience.

When going through cancer treatment the body is surrendered, handed over to doctors and controlled by the cancer itself. This can cause a degree of trauma to the body, whereby sensory and emotional connections to it become damaged and in some cases severed. What dance offers in this context is a means of returning to the body and reclaiming control, taking back ownership and in the process reigniting lost connections.

Touch forms an important part of my practice and has been instrumental in fostering sincere relationships between participants. Often during cancer treatment, the use of touch is functional and confronting, causing recipients to develop tentative feelings about it. By reintroducing it in a safe and nurturing manner one can affect change through touch and alleviate feelings of tension and anxiety. Furthermore, I found that participants develop feelings of



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Participants, Move Dance Feel.
Photo: Louise Klarnett.

acceptance towards themselves and others, appreciating their body as others acknowledge it as a source of inspiration and pleasure.

Fundamental to this development is the reciprocal nature of creative partner work. By dancing together, participants overcome feelings of self-consciousness and in exchanging ideas become more experimental with movement. Whilst this is a common feature of community dance, a notable difference is that it generates an immense amount of playfulness and laughter. A lack of judgement within the group means that women have the freedom to jest and be comical with each other, a welcome relief from the seriousness of cancer.

As facilitator of the group, I have found that my role in the sessions is fluid as I adapt to meet the needs of the moment and assess when to lead and when to be led. This oscillation has allowed for participants to have joint ownership of the creative environment, leading to some interesting

collaborations. For example, a participant was unable to dance for a few weeks due to surgery but in her desire to remain present in the group brought art materials to draw others dancing. The images she produced were of such quality that I used them as a stimulus for a choreographic task, enabling the participant to contribute to the session in another way.

Alarmingly, it is predicted that over the next 20 years cancer rates will rise six times faster in women than in men, as some of the cancer types that are becoming more prevalent are breast, ovarian, womb and cervical(4). Therefore, the necessity for projects such as Move Dance Feel is not just vitally important now, but increasingly so for the future.

I have met incredible women through Move Dance Feel who not only nourished the artist in me but have influenced how I live my life. I have learnt that we must unite in times of crisis for we are stronger together, and through others we

gain insights as to how we can help ourselves.

This project is part of a wider field of practice, demonstrating the importance of using dance to address the escalating health problems of our population. Specifically, however, it offers new ways of understanding and meeting the needs of women who are left without a lifeboat in the wake of cancer treatment.

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