

Popping for Parkinson's

Dancer, doctor and dance and health researcher **Keir Philip** and medical student **Flora Malein** illustrate the benefits of popping for people living with Parkinson's

Teacher Simone Sistarelli (foreground) with participant Sarah Webb, Popping for Parkinson's. Photo: Wilkie Branson

Popping is a dance form that developed in California in the 1960s and 1970s. Closely linked to funk and hip-hop culture, popping may not jump out as the most obvious choice of dance style to teach people with Parkinson's, yet that is exactly what one man is doing... and it works, brilliantly.

Simone Sistarelli is a dancer, dance teacher and musician who trained at Trinity Laban and tours extensively throughout Europe. He also knows about the physical and emotional impacts that Parkinson's can have on a person, as his grandfather was diagnosed with the condition. It is from his passion for dance and knowledge of the condition that Simone has started teaching a popping class in South London, specifically aimed at younger people with Parkinson's.

Although Parkinson's can affect individuals quite differently, the four main features are tremor, rigidity,



bradykinesia (slow movement) and poor balance. It is more common in older people, but can also affect people under 50 years old, in which case it is termed young onset Parkinson's.

Popping is characterised by the dancer rapidly alternating between contracting and relaxing their muscles to music, playing with the tempo and in some way trying to embody the music. It requires individuals to develop an exceptional degree of control over their muscles and the quality of their movements. Simone realised that the skills and techniques developed through learning popping could be of real benefit for people with Parkinson's as they are directly related to some of the most disabling aspects of their condition.

"I really did feel that popping can be helpful to people with Parkinson's because the essence of popping is popping your muscles to the beat of a song voluntarily and I thought that

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if people with Parkinson's could learn this tool they might be able to control their bodies in a better way, have more awareness of their bodies and hopefully less shaking."

And so far, the classes that run weekly in Wimbledon, London have turned out to be a great success. Although dance classes for Parkinson's patients are not a new concept, this appears to be the first time that popping, as a particular dance style, has been offered therapeutically for younger people with Parkinson's.

Sarah Webb, a member of the South London Younger Parkinson's Network and one of the class participants said, "It's something unusual, I hadn't really heard of body popping. I just wanted something different because we all do dancing and there's so many opportunities out there but it's all quite boring stuff for younger people, as we are still very active. So this came along and it was something quite exciting and different."

Participants say they enjoy engaging with the up-beat and contemporary dance style. In the well-lit modern dance studio in Wimbledon, it is also easy to forget that they are people with a chronic life-limiting condition resembling simply another group of novice dancers enjoying themselves as they pop their way through classics like Michael Jackson's Billie Jean and Cybotron's electro classic Clear.

"I don't feel so depressed, I feel much happier as I feel as though I'm claiming back from something that I lost for a while," says Phillip, another of the class participants. "Sometimes I can't even walk into the room but then I start dancing and I'm fine."

Class participants find themselves looking forward to the classes and say that they have had a significant impact on their lives beyond the sessions themselves. And it appears as though this benefit may not only be confined to the physical aspects of dancing.

"The impact for dance with people living with Parkinson's is multifaceted," says Dr Sara Houston from the University of Roehampton who is researching the therapeutic benefits of dance for people with the disease.

"This is because dance itself is a multifaceted activity. It's not a straightforward physical activity and includes intellectual, emotional and creative aspects to it as well. What is very clear is that dancing is of immense value to people with Parkinson's in terms of their everyday lives and how they cope with living with Parkinson's.

"I think this is a very exciting initiative... particularly as the number of people diagnosed with young onset Parkinson's is increasing. I think it is really important that they have the ability to go and experience dance in a way that they find enjoyable."

The project is not about suggesting that all people with Parkinson's should experience popping, but it is about appreciating that some might want to. Simone also believes that his initiative embodies some of the values from hip-hop culture that gave birth to the dance style he teaches.

"Hip-hop began in the neighbourhoods and ghettos of the South Bronx of New York City in the 1970s and a large part of it has been about empowering disadvantaged people and connecting with your community. Through Popping for Parkinson's, I feel that this is exactly what we are doing. My dream for the project is that we see more classes like this, with even more dance styles being offered to people with Parkinson's and other movement compromising conditions."

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