
Dance Well: autonomy in movement

Akademi is the UK's leading South Asian Dance charity, committed to inspiring audiences and changing lives through the use of classical, contemporary and participatory South Asian Dance. In this article, Akademi's Dance Well Project Officer **Claire Farmer** discusses their work bringing dance to older adults to improve their health and wellbeing

The use of the arts, and specifically dance, as a tool for improving physical and mental health and wellbeing in the general population is gradually increasing. Dance offers a means of expression, communication and bonding, as well as facilitating enhanced balance, co-ordination, aerobic fitness and strength. In addition, the opportunity to explore a dance form that may be entirely new to the participant can provide the joy of learning a new skill, regardless of age or mobility. The opportunity for social engagement – building lasting friendships and connections – is of

equal importance, especially for those who are isolated in the community.

Over the past four years Akademi has been developing its work with older adults – advocating for healthy life choices through yoga, dance and healthy cooking classes. This work culminated in January 2016 when Akademi secured funding from the National Lottery through the Big Lottery Fund for Dance Well, a three-year community participation project, targeting physically inactive older adults. Dance Well offers workshops for older adults living with a variety of long-term health conditions,

including dementia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart disease and diabetes and offers a series of 6-8 weekly workshops at each centre. Although the classes are tailored to each individual group, exploring different dance styles and with different aims and outcomes, they are unified by one goal; to improve health and wellbeing through the experience of dance. This work takes our dance artists into a range of settings, such as community centres, care homes, day centres and hospitals, and being able to adapt to each of these environments and the ever- >>



Dance Well project at St Pancras Community Association. Artist: Jane Chan. Photo: Akademi

Health and wellbeing



Dance Well workshop at Harefield Hospital. Photo: Akademi

changing needs of participants is key to the success of the workshops.

The opportunity to explore movements inspired by South Asian dance styles with this population was an exciting prospect. Akademi felt that specific nuances in Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Bollywood, etc. would resonate with older adults, such as the use of breath to reduce anxiety and tension, mudras (hand gestures) for storytelling, and ghungroos (ankle bells) and dandiya sticks to introduce rhythmic movement.

This was particularly true in workshops for those living with dementia and their carers. It was important that the carer and cared for attended the workshops as equals, foregoing their 'roles' for an hour to enjoy a creative experience together. We found the carers revelled in the chance to learn the names of the mudras and the history of the dance style, whilst those living with dementia found a joy in telling stories with these new gestures; from visiting a garden, to stories of Krishna. The use of resources such as ghungroos also brought the group together as one, unified in the rhythms of dance. One carer stated, "It's easy to lock yourself in your own compartment, but it's doing workshops like this that makes you realise the variety that is out there, as long as you have the resources to keep it going."

To those of us working in community dance, the benefits are

clear to see, however, measuring the impact of dance in any setting can be challenging. Working closely with hospital clinicians, carers, care home and community association staff has been key, not only to the success of the programme but also our ability to measure its impact. Following the success of workshops in 2016, Dance Well is again partnering with Harefield Hospital and rb&hArts in 2017 to incorporate the collection of further quantitative data into the programme. Measurement of fitness components, anxiety and depression will take place before and after a 12-week programme of Dance Well workshops. Akademi hopes that this will add to the increasing body of evidence supporting the benefits of dance in health contexts.

Using the newly validated Arts Observation Scale(1), and reflective diaries, we have already observed changes in wellbeing and social engagement during the course of Dance Well workshops. One participant shared her experiences of the workshops at Harefield Hospital: "It not only helped with breathing coordination, it helped me to connect with people, and my church has noticed a change in me." Another explained that they were keen to investigate a different form of physical activity to attending the gym after completing pulmonary rehabilitation: "I was curious and wanted to see if it

would be any good for me and I'm jolly glad I did it."

The impact of autonomy in movement and creative expression cannot be underestimated, particularly in those who have little control over other aspects of their day to day lives. Dance Well sessions therefore include opportunities for participants to explore movement in their own time, using props inspired by South Asian costumes and instruments, including colourful scarves, ghungroos, dandiya sticks and electric tealights.

Participants, and carers of those involved, have reported an increase in confidence, and connection with those living locally with similar health conditions, whom they would otherwise never have met. This social interaction and development of friendships in the group enhanced the participants' experience; it encouraged them to try activities they were initially unsure about and reduced inhibitions that may have previously prevented them from exploring creative movement and performance.

All too often we presume that older adults, particularly those living with dementia, require simple, easy to follow classes, without too many new skills to learn. However, the truth couldn't be more to the contrary. Those attending our Dance Well workshops have shown us that they are searching for stimulation, creativity; an opportunity to be challenged and pushed beyond their boundaries. Dance Well allows participants to explore this creativity in a safe environment, embedding dance and culture into daily activities, enhancing health and wellbeing, and creating new, lasting friendships.

Akademi will be publishing a guide to teaching South Asian Dance with older adults during summer 2017, which will be available to download or order in hard copy from www.akademi.co.uk

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References

1. Fancourt, D. & Poon, M. (2016) Validation of the Arts Observational Scale (ArtsObS) for the evaluation of performing arts activities in health care settings. *Arts and Health*, 8, 140-153.