

Doing the tango improves the aging brain

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The sultry moves of Argentine tango dancing can help the aging brain. McGill researchers have discovered that the fancy footwork required to perform the tango bolsters brainpower and improves balance.

With Canada's growing aging population, this news is music to health professionals' ears. About one-third of the elderly population in Canada experiences a fall each year and 40 percent of hospital admissions of this age group are due to fall-related injuries. Statistics show that 71 percent of seniors over the age of 65 live alone, and many spend more than seven hours a day without any social contact. This isolation, coupled with the normal aging process, can lead to cognitive decline.

This is where tango steps in. "Our findings suggest that tango may be better than walking for improving the execution of complex tasks and the ability to move within a restricted area without losing one's footing," says McGill University School of Physical and Occupational Therapy professor Patricia McKinley.

For the study, funded by the Drummond Foundation, researchers recruited 30 seniors from Cummings Jewish Senior centre, aged 62 to 90. All were healthy individuals who had experienced a fall within the last year and had developed a fear of falling. Half the group was assigned to take tango lessons and the other half to a walking group. Each group met for two hours twice a week for ten weeks at the Constance Lethbridge Rehabilitation Centre. The tango group showed more improvement in balance, posture and motor coordination, as well as cognitive gains, than the walking group. They also performed

significantly better than the walking group at performing a complex cognitive task while walking, standing on one foot, or turning in confined spaces.

Memory testing, however, was inconclusive, perhaps because the sample size was not large enough, says McKinley.

"Tango dancing is an ideal leisure activity for this population," says McKinley. "It satisfies three basic requirements for exercise adherence: it's fun, it's a group activity, and it has a tangible goal that can be perceived not only by the dancer, but by his or her family and friends."

Source: McGill University

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