

Dance

for

Dancing isn't just a great way to get fit – it can also have transformative psychological effects. **Marianka Swain** finds out more

JOY

“Ballroom is an all-inclusive package,” explains Kele Baker, co-director of Kensington Dance Studio (www.kensingtondancestudio.com). “You get so much more than just physical benefits. Students walk through the door carrying stress from work or family, and within an hour of dancing, they’ve forgotten all of it. You’re learning something new, so you’re entirely engaged – unlike running on a treadmill at the gym, where the only thing you learn is that you’re really bored of that Beyoncé video. Mental and emotional stimulation is key.”

Sarah Morton, director of West London Physiotherapy (www.westlondonphysio.co.uk), agrees: “Mastering new skills gives you a

heightened feeling of alertness, which you don’t get with repetitive exercise. It also allows you to develop excellent proprioception, which is your level of physical awareness – and that can help with anything from preventing injury to understanding how you present yourself to others.”

Monika Molnar of dance academy and company DanceMyWay (www.dancemyway.co.uk) loves it when her students gain this physical knowledge: “It can be life-changing. Just by learning how to engage their core muscles and develop strong posture and technique, students can show a more confident, impressive – and attractive! – version of themselves. And, as they become liberated by Latin movement, they become more expressive, sexy, confident, brave. Those qualities are inside people all the time, and Latin brings them out.”

“Dancing is probably the most natural form of movement after walking or running – but it’s so much more fun!” says Melina Hamilton, who runs Stardust Ball (www.stardustball.co.uk). “You can explore the sensuality of rumba, the grace of waltz, the aggression of tango and the cheeky happiness of cha cha cha. There are so many styles to learn – and to learn from. You resonate with the music that you’re dancing to, and your body expresses itself accordingly. Even better, you get to share this

experience with another person, so the variety is endless.”

Monika believes that sharing dance with a partner gives ballroom an advantage over other dance styles, “which aren’t so much about people and relationships. By developing your skills as a partner on the dance floor, you’re giving yourself a chance to be a better partner in real life. I love helping couples with the first dance for their wedding. Through learning to dance together, they gain an innate understanding

of each other’s strengths, flaws, fears and passions, and become more in tune with each other – and more patient!”

“My job is 75 per cent psychology, 25 per cent physical study,” notes Kele. “Everyone has a primary modality through which they learn, but lots aren’t aware of it – they might say that one teacher was better for them than another, but they won’t realise it’s because, for example, they need to see something to understand it, rather than hear it. I assess each student and find the best way to teach them – and allow them to understand how they learn. I can also help them break bad habits, such as automatically assuming their partner is at fault if something goes wrong. I teach people to take responsibility for their part of the equation.”

Monika adds: “Body language tells you so much – whether someone is open or nervous, jealous or insecure. When I point something out, people always ask, ‘How did you know that?’ It’s so much more than dance. By the end of a lesson, you may have learned something fundamental about yourself – and about how to relate to your partner.”

“It’s wonderful when couples support each other through that personal development,” says Kele.

“In one couple I’ve been teaching, the follower has, in the past, felt exposed when



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I’ve asked her to perform more loudly. Her partner has been very encouraging, and now, she’s a real Latin babe! She never had any physical problems – the only thing stopping her was her own mental block. If you can overcome that kind of challenge, you have a real sense of achievement. That’s why people get so addicted to dancing – it gives you a major high!”

The chief medical officer for the Department of Health, Professor Dame Sally Davies, would like to see more people taking on that challenge: “Anyone, of any age, can join in and experience the beneficial effect that dancing has on their quality of life.” Sarah agrees that it’s never too late to try dancing: “Taking control of your body and testing your ability to learn keeps you active, both physically and mentally.”

Monika has students of all ages, including one in her seventies, who does Latin jazz to complement her social ballroom. “It’s a level playing field,” says Monika, “no matter what your age, background, appearance or skill level, you can develop greater self-awareness through dance, interact with others more positively, and take pride in what you can achieve. That’s how you experience real joy in life.” As Lord Byron said, “On with the dance! Let joy be unconfined.” ●

