

Can Dancing Increase Happiness?  
What is the Connection between Proprioceptive Feedback During Dance and Mood Elevation?

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Pursuit of Happiness  
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During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when medical professionals were facing hospital conditions that looked like war zones, nurses around the country started a viral TikTok dance trend. During March and December of 2020, over 50 TikTok videos of nurses dancing in their scrubs in hospital hallways and break rooms averaged over 1.5 million views each.<sup>1</sup> Why would nurses instinctively turn to dance to help them psychologically cope during such a traumatic time? And why did this make perfect sense to the millions of viewers struggling through the pandemic who also found joy by watching and rewatching the nurses dance? As a competitive dancer myself, I have used dance as my personal form of therapy for years, so it seemed intuitive to me that there is something uniquely powerful about dance's ability to boost people's mood, reduce anxiety, and ward off depression. But are these shared intuitions backed by evidence? Can we really dance our way to happiness? Dance is a highly varied art form, but its basic definition is moving your body rhythmically to music. Dancing produces proprioceptive feedback, which is information that our body receives and processes from the movement of our limbs in our environment. Decades of cross-cultural research from different disciplines have demonstrated that the proprioceptive feedback from dancing is a highly effective way to increase our psychological well-being. Critics of this thesis may argue that the increase in happiness is really just caused by listening to music and physical exercise—both of which have been shown to improve mood. But researchers have isolated the psychological effects of dance apart from the effects of music and exercise, proving that dance is itself a uniquely powerful happiness tool. The link between dance and increased happiness is further supported by three categories of evidence: (1) anthropological; (2) psychological; and (3) neurobiological. Because dance is free

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<sup>1</sup> Rachele Lancaster et al., "Original Research: TikTok's 'Dancing Nurses' During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Content Analysis," *American Journal of Nursing* 122, no. 12 (2022): 24, doi:10.1097/01.NAJ.0000901844.48930.c8.

and accessible to everyone, this research creates exciting possibilities for using dance as an effective mood regulator on a very large scale.

Skeptics of dance's unique ability to increase happiness may contend that the mood-boosting effects are really just from the music and exercise, not from dance itself. Multiple studies have shown that listening to music can improve mood and psychological well-being.<sup>2</sup> Music has been used as a form of psychological therapy for nearly 100 years, and music has been used to reduce pain and anxiety during medical procedures, including surgery, dental, neurological, obstetric, and pediatric care.<sup>3</sup> Studies show that individuals also use music in their own lives to actively regulate their emotions, including to decrease feelings of sadness and depression.<sup>4</sup> Numerous studies have also demonstrated the psychological health benefits of exercise. In a systematic review of 23 different observational and intervention studies, researchers found consistent evidence that as little as ten minutes of physical activity per week can result in increased happiness levels.<sup>5</sup> These two areas of research support a strong counterargument that there is nothing unique about dance as a method for increasing happiness, and dance's impact on well-being is just an artifact of the positive effects of music and exercise.

That counterargument, however, misses key research findings that have isolated dance from the independent variables of music and exercise to prove that dance itself has a powerful impact on psychological well-being. In a 2023 study, researchers tested whether non-dancers

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<sup>2</sup> Ali M. Ahmed, "The Impact of Music on Mood: Descriptive Observations of Listening Experiences," *IOASD Journal of Medical and Pharmaceutical Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2024): 104-106, <https://ioasdpublisher.com/ioasdjmps/>.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond A. R. MacDonald, "Music, Health, and Well-Being: A Review," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 8, no. 1 (2013): 115, <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v8i0.20635>.

<sup>4</sup> Myriam V. Thoma et al., "Emotion Regulation through Listening to Music in Everyday Situations," *Cognition and Emotion* 26, no. 3 (2012): 556, [doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2011.595390](https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2011.595390).

<sup>5</sup> Zhanjia Zhang and Weiyun Chen, "A Systematic Review of the Relationship Between Physical Activity and Happiness," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 20 (2019): 1317-1318, [doi.org/10.1007/s10902-018-9976-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-018-9976-0).

who imitate dance movements performed by a professional dancer who is attempting to express happiness end up increasing their own happiness levels.<sup>6</sup> The researchers videotaped a dancer performing the same dance sequence in three ways: once trying to express happiness, once trying to express sadness, and once trying to express neutral emotion. The researchers turned those clips into human-avatar-based videos *without music*. The silent videos were shown to 66 adults, who provided self-assessments of their own emotion levels before and after watching and performing one of the three randomly-assigned dance versions. The study found that imitating movements that a dancer performed with a happy intention increased participants' self-rated happiness levels, while imitating the same movements that a dancer performed with a sad intention increased participants' self-rated sadness levels.<sup>7</sup> These findings rebut the argument that it's the music and not dance itself that boosts mood, because the participants did not hear any music when they watched and mimicked the dance moves. These findings also help rebut the argument that it's just exercise that boosts mood. If exercise was causing the effect, then subjects in both the happy and sad dance conditions would have reported a boost in happiness because they were performing the same movements requiring the same physical exertion. The different mood impacts from the happy versus sad dance conditions provide evidence of a unique role for dance through proprioceptive feedback to regulate mood.

This finding of a unique mood-boosting impact of dance was confirmed by another study that also isolated dance from music and exercise, involving 31 patients with diagnosed

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<sup>6</sup> Eva-Madeleine Schmidt et al., "Mood Induction through Imitation of Full-Body Movements with Different Affective Intentions," *British Journal of Psychology* 115, no. 1 (2023): 172-172, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12681>.

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt et al., "Mood Induction," 165-166.

depression.<sup>8</sup> The patients were split into three groups: one group participated in an upbeat circle dance; one group just listened to the music that went with the dance; and one group rode a stationary bike without music. Participants in the dance group self-reported significantly more improvement in their depressive symptoms than participants in either the music group or the exercise group.<sup>9</sup> The unique impact of dance, separate from its exercise component, is also supported by a study of 133 college students that specifically compared the effects of dance versus sports on psychological well-being.<sup>10</sup> The students were split into three groups: some took a dance class; some took a sports class; and some took an academic class. The dance and sports classes were designed to require the same amount of physical exertion. The students filled out surveys rating their psychological well-being before and after the classes. The researchers found that the dance classes improved participants' self-evaluations of happiness, security, confidence, relaxation, creativity, motivation, and health significantly more than the students in both the sports and academic classes.<sup>11</sup> The researchers concluded that "dance uniquely changes subjects' evaluations of their psychological well-being."<sup>12</sup> These studies isolating dance from the variables of music and exercise provide a strong rebuttal to the counterargument that dance has no unique role to play in increasing happiness.

The link between dance and psychological well-being is further supported by anthropological research, which reveals that dance has been central to human life across time and

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<sup>8</sup> Sabine C. Koch et al., "The Joy Dance: Specific Effects of a Single Dance Intervention on Psychiatric Patients with Depression," *The Arts in Psychology* 34, no. 4 (2007): 343, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2007.07.001>.

<sup>9</sup> Koch et al., "The Joy Dance," 347-348.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Gurley et al., "Dance and Sports Compared: Effects on Psychological Well-Being," *Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness* 24, no. 1 (1984): 67, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/6471841/>.

<sup>11</sup> Gurley et al., "Dance and Sports Compared," 62.

<sup>12</sup> Gurley et al., "Dance and Sports Compared," 67.

cultures. Archaeologists have found prehistoric cave drawings depicting dance throughout the world dating from 6000 to 9000 YBP, and possibly as old as 70,000 YBP.<sup>13</sup> Cave art is identified as depicting dance based on four elements: (1) people are often represented in a circle; (2) people are shown moving in the same direction; (3) rhythm is indicated with people at similar distances from each other in similar poses; and (4) the body positions include bent limbs and often arms lifted overhead.<sup>14</sup> Unlike other prehistoric activities commonly found in cave art, such as hunting, family life, and sex, dance is “an energetically costly activity with no apparent functional use.”<sup>15</sup> This has led archaeologists to believe that dance must play an important role in social or psychological well-being. Developmental psychologists have reached the same conclusion based on cross-cultural evidence that human infants as young as three weeks old will spontaneously synchronize their body movements to beats.<sup>16</sup> This innate drive to map body movement onto sounds seems to be uniquely human. Our closest relatives, chimpanzees, do not spontaneously dance, and researchers have found it extremely difficult to teach chimpanzees any type of rhythmic movement.<sup>17</sup> Developmental psychologists conclude that the human brain must be “hardwired to promote dance.”<sup>18</sup> Anthropologists have also discovered several universal dance movements across widely divergent cultures and time periods, including leg turn-out, an arched back, leaps, the lifted bent-legged “attitude” position, and what is referred to as “second

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<sup>13</sup> Julia F. Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex: Neural and Biobehavioral Functions of Human Dance,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1400, no. 0077-8923 (2017): 10, doi:10.1111/nyas.13420.

<sup>14</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 10.

<sup>15</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 10.

<sup>16</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 11.

<sup>17</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 11.

<sup>18</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 12.

position” in ballet.<sup>19</sup> Anthropologists conclude that these universal dance features indicate that dance shares a common cognitive structure, “similar to language,” which has significant social and psychological importance.<sup>20</sup>

The link between dance and psychological well-being is also supported by extensive psychological research showing that dance improves mood and reduces depression and anxiety. In 2024, researchers reviewed 218 different studies that have used randomized trials to test the impact of various forms of exercise to treat a total of 14,170 participants who met the clinical definition of depression.<sup>21</sup> The study found that dancing had the largest benefit for improving symptoms over control groups, using before and after self-ratings.<sup>22</sup> Dancing improved mood more than walking, jogging, yoga, strength training, aerobic exercise, tai chi, quigong, and cycling.<sup>23</sup> Although this research involved clinically depressed individuals, the researchers found a positive impact from dance on individuals with all different levels of initial depression.<sup>24</sup> Doctors have become so convinced of dance’s unique ability to increase psychological well-being that they have used dance therapy to help treat patients undergoing the stress and anxiety of serious physical illnesses as well, including cancer, amputations, traumatic brain injury, stroke, anorexia, bulimia, Alzheimer’s, cystic fibrosis, heart disease, diabetes, asthma, AIDS, and arthritis.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 12-15.

<sup>20</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 12.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Noetel et al., “Effect of Exercise for Depression: Systemic Review and Network Meta-Analysis of Randomised Controlled Trials,” *BMJ Journal* 384 (2024): e075847, doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2023-075847.

<sup>22</sup> Noetel et al., “Effect of Exercise for Depression,” 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> Noetel et al., “Effect of Exercise for Depression,” 8.

<sup>24</sup> Noetel et al., “Effect of Exercise for Depression,” 12.

<sup>25</sup> Akas and Ogce, “Dance as a Therapy for Cancer Prevention,” *Asian Pacific Journal of Cancer Prevention* 6, no. 3 (2005): 408.

The ability of dance to reduce psychological stress has been replicated in different locations and cultures around the world, including such diverse places as Australia, Poland, and China.<sup>26</sup> One large study in China specifically focused on demonstrating not just the power of dancing to treat depression, but to actually prevent it. The 2021 study gathered extensive survey data from 901 students from eight universities in China.<sup>27</sup> The surveys evaluated each student's current level of depression, if any, and also gathered data on 30 potential depression-related risk factors covering diet, living habits, health history, and family background. The study found that students who were members of college dance teams had significantly lower rates of depression than other students, even when adjusting for other risk factors, and independent of overall exercise levels.<sup>28</sup>

The positive effect of dance on psychological well-being has also been replicated across a wide range of dance styles, including tango, ballroom, and Latin.<sup>29</sup> For example, an Australian study recruited 66 adults who self-reported stress, anxiety, or depression.<sup>30</sup> The participants were split into three groups: one group took six weeks of tango classes; one group took six weeks of meditation classes; and one group was put into a "waiting-list" control. The participants in both the tango and the meditation groups reported significantly more reduction in depression than the

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<sup>26</sup> Rosa Pinniger et al., "Argentine Tango Dance Compared to Mindfulness Meditation and a Waiting-List Control: A Randomised Trial for Treating Depression," *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 20, no. 6 (2012): 382, doi.org/10.1016/j.ctim.2012.07.003; Lirong Zhang et al., "Frequent Sports Dance May Serve as a Protective Factor for Depression Among College Students: A Real-World Data Analysis in China," *Psychological Research and Behavior Management* 14 (2012): 420, doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S299891; Marcin Zajenkowski et al., "Let's Dance—Feel Better! Mood Changes Following Dancing in Different Situations," *European Journal of Sports Science* 15, no. 7 (2015): 644, doi/10.1080/17461391.2014.969324.

<sup>27</sup> Zhang et al., "Frequent Sports Dance," 420.

<sup>28</sup> Zhang et al., "Frequent Sports Dance," 411.

<sup>29</sup> Pinniger et al., "Argentine Tango Dance," 382; Zhang et al., "Frequent Sports Dance," 420; Zajenkowski et al., "Let's Dance—Feel Better!," 644.

<sup>30</sup> Pinniger et al., "Argentine Tango Dance," 382.

control group, and the tango participants also reported significantly more reduction in stress levels than either the meditation or control groups.<sup>31</sup> Another study found that both recreational and competitive dancers in Poland reported increased happiness levels and reduced stress after taking part in a ballroom dance training session.<sup>32</sup> While this research suggests that many forms of dance have the same mood-boosting effects, the studies have typically focused on dance forms requiring synchronous movement with others. One study found that dancing next to others, but not in synchronicity with them, produced less improvement in positive feelings than performing the same movements at the same time as others.<sup>33</sup> This finding indicates the need for additional research to assess precisely what forms of dance movement are the most effective at improving psychological well-being.

While the psychological evidence strongly links dance and happiness across time periods, cultures, geographies, and dance styles, there is also preliminary evidence indicating the positive impacts of dance across genders and ages. In the 2024 meta-analysis of 218 studies of over 14,000 participants who met the clinical definition of depression, the researchers found some gender and age differences in the benefits from certain forms of exercise. For example, they found that yoga improved depression symptoms more for older men, and strength training improved depression symptoms more for younger women.<sup>34</sup> However, the researchers found that dance outperformed all other forms of exercise for improving mood in individuals with

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<sup>31</sup> Pinniger et al., “Argentine Tango Dance,” 382.

<sup>32</sup> Zajenkowski et al., “Let’s Dance–Feel Better!,” 644.

<sup>33</sup> Bronwyn Tarr et al., “Silent Disco: Dancing in Synchrony Leads to Elevated Pain Thresholds and Social Closeness,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 37, no. 5 (2016): 346-347. doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2016.02.004.

<sup>34</sup> Noetel et al., “Effect of Exercise for Depression,” 14.

depression, and they found no evidence of gender or age differences.<sup>35</sup> But they could not completely rule out any gender or age differences because dance had been attempted as an intervention for depression primarily among groups of young women, which skewed the data to include a total population of 88% women with a mean age of 31 years.<sup>36</sup> The results are still promising for dance as a potentially universal method of mood regulation, but the researchers caution that “it is also important for future research to assess the generalizability of the effects to different populations, using robust experimental designs.”<sup>37</sup> The real-world study of 901 college students in China provides some additional evidence of dance’s psychological benefits across genders. The study’s finding that students who are members of college dance teams had significantly lower rates of depression than other students found no differences between females and males.<sup>38</sup> There were 105 students in the dance team group, consisting of 69 females (66%) and 36 males (34%), and all rated lower on anxiety and depression than other students.<sup>39</sup> The skewed ratio of females to males, however, suggests more research is still required to rule out gender differences. But it suggests that dance has similar positive benefits for both females and males, and that males are just socially or culturally conditioned away from dance as a preferred form of exercise. Greater evidence exists to demonstrate the psychological benefits of dance across ages, including for the elderly. A 2019 meta-analysis analyzed six different studies on the effect of dance therapy for healthy, elderly participants.<sup>40</sup> The studies used age-appropriate forms

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<sup>35</sup> Noetel et al., “Effect of Exercise for Depression,” 14.

<sup>36</sup> Noetel et al., “Effect of Exercise for Depression,” 13.

<sup>37</sup> Noetel et al., “Effect of Exercise for Depression,” 13.

<sup>38</sup> Zhang et al., “Frequent Sports Dance,” 411.

<sup>39</sup> Zhang et al., “Frequent Sports Dance,” 417.

<sup>40</sup> Rosana F. Pessoa, Clara M. Neves, and Maria E. C. Ferreira, “Dance Therapy in Aging: A Systematic Review,” *Journal of Physical Education and Sport* 19, no. 2 (2019): 1180, doi:10.7752/jpes.2019.02171.

of dance, with low-intensity movements, sometimes while sitting in chairs. The researchers found that regular participation in dance increased elderly individuals' reports of happiness and psychological well-being, and decreased anxiety and depression. The elderly dance participants felt more independent, social, and peaceful. They also reported improved cognition and attention, which indirectly improved their subjective well-being.<sup>41</sup> These studies indicate that dance may have universal psychological benefits across genders and ages, which is an area worth studying more in-depth in future research.

In addition to anthropological and psychological evidence, the link between dance and happiness is also supported by neurobiological evidence, which finds that dance has a uniquely positive effect on our brains and bodies. In 2017, researchers reviewed the neural and biobehavioral research on dance and concluded that “dance is an external system of autoregulation that aids in the maintenance of psychological and mental health.”<sup>42</sup> The researchers discovered that dancing triggers the release of reward-related neurotransmitters, including endorphins and opioids, and that dancing improves immunoreactivity.<sup>43</sup> Dance also produces the positive biological effects from exercise generally, including improved equilibrium, coordination, muscle tone, and cardiovascular health.<sup>44</sup> The researchers also found that dance improves psychobiological learning, leading to increased self-esteem and confidence, which promotes long-term happiness. Dance has this effect by increasing oxytocin and prolactin, which are endocrine markers of social bonding and attachment that are strongly linked to happiness.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Pessoa et al., “Dance Therapy in Aging,” 1185.

<sup>42</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 9.

<sup>43</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 9.

<sup>44</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 9.

<sup>45</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 20.

The study also found evidence that people can consciously use dance to help achieve happiness. For example, the researchers found that people can actively use dance to reestablish oxytocin balance after periods of sadness or loneliness, or to reduce stress-related cortisol levels.<sup>46</sup>

The positive neurobiological effects of dance seem to be particularly strong when people dance in synchrony with others. A 2016 study involved 94 adults from Oxford who learned four dance moves from a video in private rooms.<sup>47</sup> They were then split into groups of four strangers. Each group stood in a square facing each other, and each person listened to 13 minutes of music through personal headphones. The groups were randomly assigned to three conditions. The “synchrony” groups heard the same music in their headphones and danced the same four moves at the same time. The “partial synchrony” groups listened to the same music in their headphones, but performed the four dance moves in a different sequence from each other. The “asynchrony” groups listened to different music in their headphones and performed four different dance moves. Before and after data were gathered from self-reports of positive feelings, testing their pain threshold, and surveys rating their sense of social bonding. The study found that all participants in all of the dance conditions reported improved positive feelings after the experiment.<sup>48</sup> However, the participants in the synchrony groups also had higher pain thresholds after the experiment, indicating an endorphin release, and higher social bonding scores, indicating increased oxytocin and prolactin.<sup>49</sup> This study provides further evidence that there is a neurobiological connection between dance and human happiness.

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<sup>46</sup> Christensen et al., “Not all about Sex,” 9.

<sup>47</sup> Tarr et al., “Silent Disco,” 346-347.

<sup>48</sup> Tarr et al., “Silent Disco,” 347.

<sup>49</sup> Tarr et al., “Silent Disco,” 347.

Dancing has been central to human life across time and cultures. Anthropological, psychological, and neurobiological evidence all show that this is because dancing has a unique ability to increase people's psychological well-being. The happiness power of dance is not just from its music and exercise component: we feel better even when we dance without music, and we feel better from dancing than from doing other types of exercise. So if we really can dance our way to happiness, what implications does that finding have? First, this research creates a strong argument that schools should be incorporating dance into their physical education programs to help reduce the increasing stress, anxiety, and depression faced by today's youth. Incorporating dance into school programs at an early age could also destigmatize dance for boys, encouraging more males to get involved in and reap the psychological benefits of dance. Second, this research opens opportunities for inexpensive therapy tools that easily make dance accessible to everyone. One example is the Everdance app. This app offers subscribers a variety of on-demand online dance classes and dance workouts geared for every level. The Everdance app markets itself as a tool to "Improve your Mental Health" by using dance to "boost your endorphins, reduce stress and make you happy," which may be more than just marketing hype, based on the scientific evidence.

Building the most effective dance tools for increasing happiness will require additional research to fill in some of the gaps in the current research, including identifying the most effective forms of dance and proving the generalizability of dance's positive effects across different populations. The research is just starting to identify specific conditions under which dancing is most effective for improving mood. One study suggests that dancing in synchronicity is more effective than dancing freestyle.<sup>50</sup> Another study suggests that being directed by an

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<sup>50</sup> Tarr et al., "Silent Disco," 346-347.

instructor is more effective than learning on your own, at least for individuals with preexisting mental health conditions.<sup>51</sup> And another study suggests that dancing competitively does not offer the same happiness boost as dancing for practice.<sup>52</sup> More studies are required to test these and other specific contexts and conditions in order to use this research to proactively design dance-related mental health tools. In addition, researchers should try to validate the preliminary evidence that dance improves well-being across genders and ages. Existing research has also focused mostly on able-bodied individuals, which offers another path for future research. Several organizations are experimenting with using dance to improve psychological well-being in individuals with disabilities, including “Dance for All Bodies,” which is committed to making dance accessible to anyone with any disability. The results of those and other similar efforts to expand dance access to diverse individuals should be encouraged and empirically tested. These future efforts have the potential to enable even more people to experience the unique happiness benefits of dance.

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<sup>51</sup> Noetel et al., “Effect of Exercise for Depression,” 13.

<sup>52</sup> Zajenkowski et al., “Let’s Dance–Feel Better!,” 644.

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