

Why Dance for PDSM?

Nine years ago, the Brooklyn Parkinson Group (BPG), a NPF chapter, and the Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) started a collaboration to develop Dance for PDSM classes and offer them, free of charge, to persons with Parkinson's disease in Brooklyn, New York. The program, funded by NPF, has become so successful that they now help other groups start their own Dance for PDSM collaborations throughout the United States, Canada, England, Germany and Scotland.

Olie Westheimer, the founder and executive director of BPG, recognized the need for members of her support groups to participate in a highly social and joyful activity unrelated to therapy — away from clinics, hospitals and therapists' offices. Her main aim was to combat obvious depression among people with PD and their caregivers.

That activity became weekly Dance for PDSM classes led by dancers and faculty from Mark Morris. Dance was chosen because Westheimer recognized that professional dancers and persons with PD both have to explore how to make their bodies move, and dancing is inherently engaging and joyful.

In 2006, the collaboration added a customizable teacher-training component to help teachers gain a deeper understanding of the disease and how dance can improve the lives of people with PD. The Brooklyn Parkinson group, in collaboration with Mark Morris and neurologists, also conducts research on the effects of their classes.

For people living with PD, exercise is a vital component to maintaining a sense of well being, balance, mobility and daily living activities. There is a growing interest in this type of exercise intervention to benefit individuals with Parkinson's disease, both nationally and internationally.

Research indicates that patients enrolled in exercise programs for longer than six months have shown significant gains in functional balance and mobility. There is also growing evidence from animal models that exercise may help the brain to maintain old connections, form new ones and restore lost ones.

Based upon interviews, Dance for PDSM participants felt that their quality of life had improved because they felt active, social, physically fit and more vigorous; they also



*Jazz Across the Studio
(Credit: A.S. Merkens)*



*Improvisational mirroring
(Credit: K. Tanaka)*

gained a deeper understanding of themselves and their bodies. Recent research, not yet published, shows improvement in gait and tremor, and that the effect of the classes also relates to improved motivation. Now ask yourself this: Why dance for PD? What are you waiting for? Get involved in your community!

Why Dance for PDSM?

- Dancing is joyful, especially to live music.
- Dancing is a social activity.
- Dancing is excellent exercise. A dance class provides a complete workout. Dancing stretches, strengthens, and relaxes muscles.
- Dancing is, first and foremost, a mental activity. Dancing involves using the brain as well as the body to control movement. The brain gets a complete workout too.
- Dancing makes use of the senses. Conscious use of vision, hearing and touch makes moving easier for persons with PD, just as it does for dancers.

The Brooklyn Parkinson Group received a NPF chapter grant in 2006 to develop a DVD, "Why Dance for PDSM?" NPF is also supporting the development of a web site to encourage more Dance for PDSM programs.

Dance for PDSM classes are now offered in the following states: CA, CT, FL, GA, ID, IL, MA, MD, NY, SC, TN, TX, VA and WA.

*For more information, visit
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