

BACK TO BALLET



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Hatty Willmoth rediscovers the joys of ballet as an adult, after giving up as a teenager

There are plenty of reasons why an adult might choose to do ballet. The physical benefits of dancing are clear; it can improve strength, balance, flexibility,¹ muscular control,² coordination,² and posture,³ as well as general fitness. Plus, for those who grew up pirouetting, ballet can be nostalgic and easier than starting from scratch.

I danced from a young age. Thanks to my pestering, my parents sent me to ballet lessons soon after I started school, and I went for eight years. I got quite far with ballet too, taking exams and often performing at local theatres, and when I was 11, I got my first pair of pointe shoes.

But I steadily became reluctant to go to classes. One of the girls used to throw her tap shoes at me to make the others laugh. Not to mention, Grade 5 was getting tricky and the teacher's comments towards me felt increasingly cutting — memorably, "Well done, Hatty. I can see you're trying".

I wasn't naturally talented at ballet, I decided. I didn't like the lessons. I didn't want to go. So I quit.

And I never considered going back — until now.

The benefits of adult ballet

Ballet is often assumed to be for little girls and professionals, but anyone can have a go; as I discovered when I joined a class of 10 adults, aged from their 20s to 50s, at Danceforce in Kingston, west London. The school offers separate classes to over-60s too.

Joey Flint, 50, started going to ballet to get fit post-lockdown. "I wanted to do something that I knew I would stick with that combined my love of classical music with flexibility and stamina," she says. "I enjoyed ballet as a young person so decided to give it a go again."

And she's glad she did. "It's a friendly non-competitive environment, which makes a huge difference. The music helps you to mentally relax, and the focus on both flexibility and stamina means you get fitter as well as flexible. It is a great way to get out of the house, have a bit of a chat, and get fit!"

Others in the class emphasise the mental and social benefits of dancing. Corinna Schroeder, 34, started going to ballet to improve her posture and strengthen her muscles after a recent

back injury. “Whilst my initial motivation to start ballet was mostly about the physical exercise, I quickly noticed that memorising a routine and focusing on coordination also keeps challenging me mentally in a very different way to my usual day to day job,” she says.

“Besides this, for me it is a great way to embrace being a beginner again and just doing something for fun without taking myself too seriously.”

That’s one thing I love about the lesson: unlike my past experiences of ballet classes, the atmosphere is relaxed, self-effacing, and jovial. It is refreshing to laugh when it all goes wrong.

The joyful encouragement of ballet teacher Matilda Adams, 22, is welcome too. Having danced since the age of two, she trained at Kirkham Henry Performing Arts, the Northern Ballet Academy and The Royal Academy of Dance, and relentlessly insists that “ballet is for everyone”.

“Ballet is so amazing because it can make so many different types of people feel so happy for so many different reasons,” she says. “Not only are the physical benefits — such as improving your coordination, balance, strength, bone density and overall fitness — a key benefit from ballet, the mental benefits are equally as fulfilling.

“The music used in ballet is something I love about the art form and can instantly increase your mood. Ballet, especially adult ballet, can also be a great way to socialise and meet new people that love the same thing as you do. It is also a great way to express yourself and how you are feeling through the movement and the music.”

Dancing as you age

Ballet can also offer particular advantages for those who are getting older. A 2021 study suggested that dancing can help lower cholesterol levels, improve fitness and body composition, and improve self-esteem among post-menopausal women, who are at greater risk of weight gain, metabolic disturbances and cardiovascular issues.³

Another study, this one from 2017, concluded that dancing has the most profound anti-ageing effect of any form of exercise on the part of the brain that controls memory, learning and balance.⁴

Meanwhile, when researchers in New Zealand tested the effects of music and dancing on dementia patients in 2019, they found that participants reported significant improvements in their quality of life after six sessions.⁵ The lead author of the study, Ting Choo, observed that



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participants increasingly engaged in “memory recalling, spontaneous dancing and joking with each other” with each session.

Ballet Based Movement

Many ballet lessons are specifically geared towards older people. YouTube channel *Ballet Based Movement* delivers online lessons for their 11,600 subscribers every fortnight and livestreams Zoom classes every week.

A mother and daughter named Elizabeth and Susan run the channel. Three years ago, Elizabeth was struggling with mobility, stability and balance, and significant pain in her foot, and she asked her daughter for help. Susan recommended gentle danced-based exercise, having danced herself since the age of five, and began coaching Elizabeth in this type of movement.

Under Susan’s instruction, Elizabeth reported vast improvements in her balance and stability. Her foot began to heal, her body became more toned and her fitness and mental alertness ameliorated.

Susan began sending Elizabeth videos of exercises to do in her spare time. They shared them with their friends, and then on a YouTube channel, which took off once the pandemic hit.

The movement they teach is not strictly ‘ballet’, but has been adapted for their clientele — men and women, with a variety of mobility limitations, typically in their 60s, 70s and 80s. They even cater to those unable to stand.

“Our dancers love what we do,” they tell me. “We are overwhelmed by their responses to us.

“The best thing about ballet — and dance for that matter — is you are accidentally exercising while having

fun. It is so joyful. Humanity has been moving to music forever — we innately find true joy in it. But the other benefits are numerous.

“You have to be absolutely present when you are in a ballet class. There are many elements that need to come together: the movement, the steps, and keeping in time to the music. This requires a lot of focus, and this is excellent for the mind — not only cognition, but clarity.

“Physically, ballet is so good for control, mobility, strength, stability and working on balance, which is so important as one gets older. Many of our dancers talk about the confidence in the stability and balance they gain doing ballet. And this is all through seemingly gentle but hugely effective exercises.

“In our livestream classes, we have a real community that thoroughly enjoys being together. Everyone comes to the class 15 minutes before it begins and they all chat to each other, and after class we chat for a good 20 to 30 minutes. We just love it.”

Back at the barre

I had a wonderful evening trying out ballet again. With no tap shoes to dodge or derisive comments from teachers, the class was just joyful.

In fact, nearly a decade after giving up, I have recently purchased a new pair of ballet shoes, because I’m now going every week.

References:

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