



# Dancers using the tango to fight off depression

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**What flamenco is to Spain, or what jazz was to the United States, tango is to South America.**

Its sensuous formality has inspired poets and composers and an art form thought to have begun in Argentinian brothels has fans around the world.

Now there is new research in Australia which suggests that tango may help people fight depression.

A University of New England researcher has been running a trial to see if concentrating on dance steps keeps negative thoughts away.

Long-time tango teacher Jackie Simpson instructs a class of about 20 people in an old church hall in the inner Sydney suburb of Surry Hills.

One of Ms Simpson's female dance pupils says she decided to get involved in tango therapy to try to overcome depression.

"So I read about this and although I don't dance, just my whole being went, yeah! You know, yeah, I want to learn to tango, I want to learn to do this," she said.

"It just sounded, just something that I wanted to do.

"After the first night I got home and I just felt so energised and for the next two days I just felt so focused and things that I was just feeling that I was overwhelmed about before, I just had the energy to do."

She says she decided to take part in the classes to help deal with her grief.

"I was feeling really at a deep place," she said.

"I lost a son about two-and-a-half years ago and where I had done a lot of grieving I just found I wasn't getting up and getting back into life that much."

Rosa Pinniger is an honours student at the University of New England, where she is studying cognitive and behavioural therapy.

Psychologists use it to try to help people fight negative thoughts and see situations more positively.

Ms Pinniger says many studies have shown that meditation can be helpful in learning to do this.

While studying the benefits of meditation she realised the brain works in a similar way when dancing the tango.

"While you're doing tango you can only be in the present - you really have to focus, concentrate, and it doesn't allow your thoughts to drive into your mind," she said.

"And this is one of the things of meditation, the other thing is that for example in meditation people usually use their breathing, and this is something that people have done all their lives - they know how to breathe but they need to be aware of their breathing and they use it.

"The same with the tango - everyone walks and as long as you can walk you can tango, and this is the truth.

"The only thing is that usually we are not aware of how we walk and in tango you have to."

### **Positive changes**

Ms Pinniger says the participants in her trial have kept coming back to the tango classes because they can see results.

"If people can have a break from their negative thoughts for three minutes - which is the time of the tango - they can realise that it is possible," she said.

"And sometimes we only need to know that something is possible. If we can do it once, we can do it again and again and again.

"I think that this is why people tonight, while they are doing tango, this is what it is, nothing else. So all their problems and their thoughts, they cannot be, they are not invited in the tango."

One of the participants found the tango helped take her mind away from a particularly painful event in her life.

"We've had a death in the family and I forgot about it while we were dancing and I guess the depression was all part of looking after someone that we knew was dying," she said.

"So I was very depressed for a long time but you come here and you forget about it, you know, so, for a moment."

But generally the people at the tango class enjoy getting together and learning something new.

"When you're learning and you're practising and you get, well, you're sort of achieving things, I think that makes you feel good about yourself. So I think that's helpful," one pupil said.

"I noticed a huge improvement in how I was feeling during the classes - particularly after maybe doing three or four.

"I think it has a blend of a social element. There's a closeness to other people so you can learn to trust again and there's a physical exercise in it but it's so subtle that you don't really notice.

"So it's the subtle blend of many things."

Ms Pinniger says learning to tango will not cure depression but can be used with other therapies.

She also says it is not for everyone - meditation may be better for some.

"Let's not forget that meditation although it has many things in common with tango, but it's still an individualistic activity while tango it is more social," she said.

"For some people maybe they are not in the state that they want to go that step further of connecting and then it's okay.

"We are all individuals and we have to choose which one is better for us, that's all."

All of Jackie Simpson's tango students have decided to continue learning to dance the tango - and even Ms Pinniger says she might take up learning the exotic art form herself.

### **Based on a report by Carly Laird for PM**

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