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What do you think when you hear the word “dance”? Chances are, you think of dancing at a dub-step heavy club, or perhaps taking your children to their ballet lesson. You’re unlikely to think of Alzheimer’s, depression, and dementia, and yet these are just three of the many potential diseases that dancing can help protect against. Next time you’re invited to go dancing, grab a partner and take to the dance floor. Here’s why:

1. Improve Brain Function

A study published by the *New England Journal of Medicine* concluded that participation in leisure activities were associated with lower risks of dementia. Of the activities studied, which included reading, playing board games, playing music, and dancing, dancing showed the best cognitive improvements, due to the mentally engaging nature of dance itself. To get both the physical and mental benefits of dancing, try taking a new class like swing, waltz, or salsa.

2. Counteract Effects of Depression

Dancing is a stimulating activity, mentally, physically, and emotionally –especially when done with a partner. Ballroom dancing can be a great way to get the benefits of exercise while developing a connection with a loved one or friend. This study points to the decrease in depression levels following 12 weeks of instructed dance classes. Look for ballroom studies like Arthur Murray or Fred Astaire, or check out local listings for weekly classes.

3. Reduce Anxiety

Dancing in front of a crowd might seem like an anxiety-provoking activity, but recent research points to its anxiety-reducing effects. This meta-analysis demonstrated that subjects experienced small but consistent improvements to their physical and mental well-being—and, more specifically, to their mood. For those looking for less structured dance, look into dance movement therapy or expressive arts, which can encourage dancers to move in a way that feels natural to their body.

4. Maintain a Healthier Weight

While hours spent on the elliptical or rowing machine might not sound fun, dancing can be a stimulating and exciting way to move—without feeling like you're really exercising. Some classes, like Zumba, provide a cardiovascular workout to the tune of pop songs, while jazzercise is an option for those who are interested in fusing cardio, strength training, and Pilates to music.

5. Develop a Deep Bond

Dancing with your partner is fun, but learning to dance with your partner is something entirely different. Having to cooperate and work together with your partner—be it romantic partner or friend—encourages trust in your relationship. Pick a dance that neither of you have tried before, like foxtrot, rumba, cha cha, or Viennese waltz, and find a local studio to help you master the basics. Patience is necessary, but the rewards will far outweigh any initial frustration.

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